1991

The development of the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road

David Harmon Johnson
San Jose State University

Order Number 1344281

The development of the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road, 1852–1882

Johnson, David Harmon, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1991

U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SONORA AND MONO WAGON ROAD 1852 - 1882

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

David Harmon Johnson

May, 1991

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Dr. Daniel Cornford

Dr. H. Brett Melendy

Dr. Charles Keserich

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade a succession of zealous citizens in California's southern mining region campaigned for the construction of a trans-Sierra road between Nevada and northern Tuolumne County. The route was first proposed in 1852 as an immigrant trail, but by 1860 changing circumstances had shifted focus to the development of a commercial wagon road, linking California to Nevada. Although most of the road's proponents were sincere in their exhortations about the project, their anticipation of substantial economic gains and their eagerness to stimulate regional growth distorted their perception of the ease by which such a road could be built and prompted exaggerated forecasts about the benefits to be derived from it.

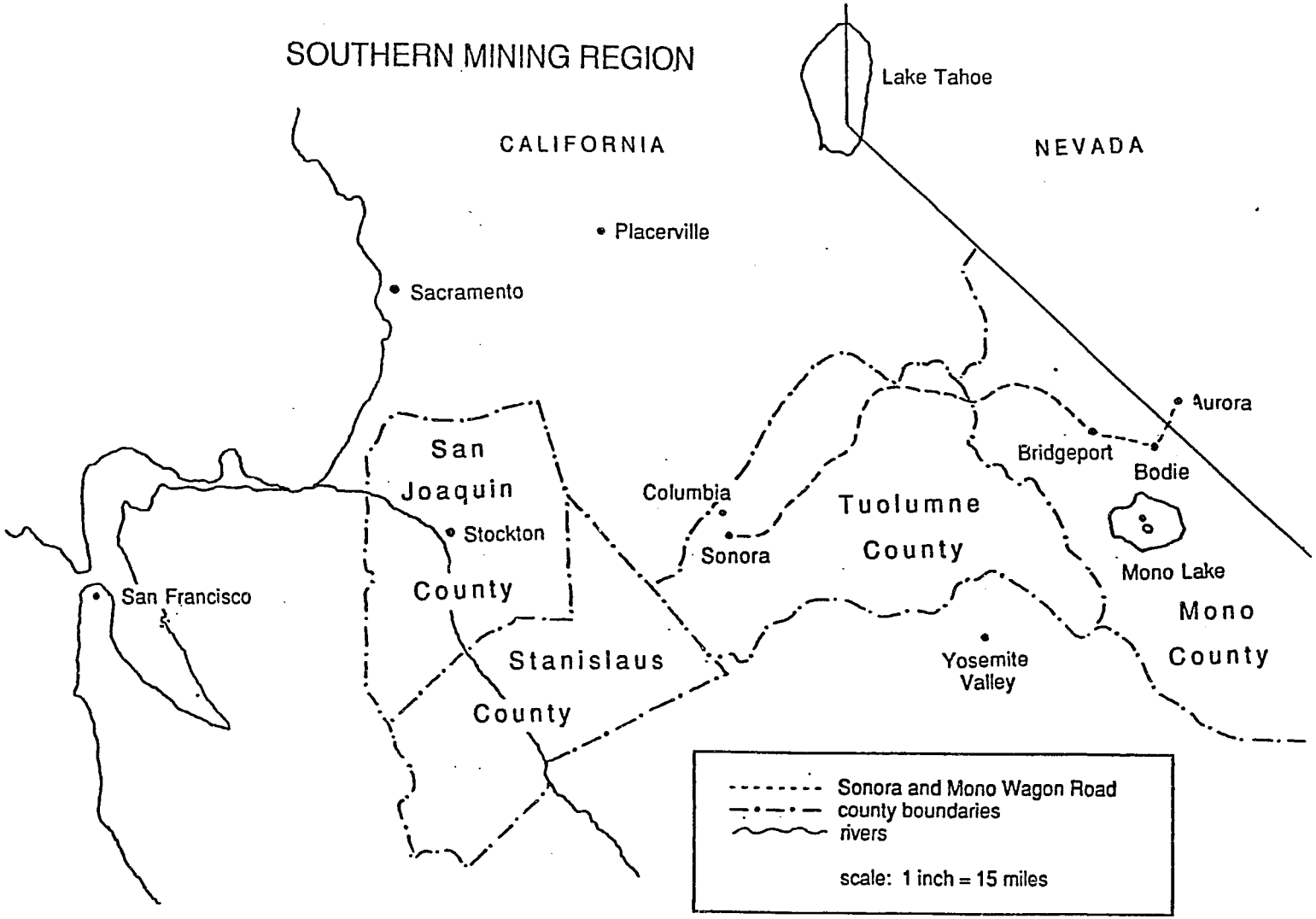
Despite their enthusiasm for the project, road supporters were repeatedly thwarted in their efforts by a variety of obstacles, including lack of capital, difficult mountain terrain, and political and regional divisions. When the road was finally opened in 1864, the Nevada mining boom had already begun to decline. The subsequent collapse of the Nevada markets left Tuolumne and her neighboring counties with a road that could not fulfill the extravagant predictions of its advocates. It wasn't until more than a decade later that the renewed mining excitement in Bodie provided the opportunity for the Sonora and Mono Road to contribute the service that its early supporters had envisioned.

Four unifying themes are woven through the road's history: the quest for economic enhancement; the growth of regional cooperation; the arousal of

unrealistic expectations through the dissemination of misinformation; and the struggle against obstacles and opposition. These four interconnected issues evolved in magnitude and complexion throughout the period, responding to changes in economic, political, and demographic conditions.

While proponents of the route enumerated a broad array of secondary benefits to be derived from a trans-Sierra road, their primary motivation was to improve their economic condition. The roller coaster cycle of boom and bust in the West repeatedly raised economic expectations and then invariably plunged them into depression. Merchants, ravaged by the rapid fluctuations of demand, sought to stabilize their situation first by encouraging permanent settlement of the region and later by expanding their range of markets. A trans-Sierra road through Tuolumne County became the means to achieve both ends.

Tuolumne County was part of the southern mining region, which included Calaveras County to the north, Mariposa County to the south, and Mono County to the east. Three adjacent counties in the San Joaquin Valley--Stanislaus, San Joaquin, and Merced Counties--were closely linked with the southern mining region. The city of Stockton in San Joaquin County served as the central supply depot and the hub of transportation routes for the entire southern mining region. Virtually all travelers and freight passed through Stockton before fanning out to any of the scattered communities in the the southern mines. The mining settlements depended on the valley counties to maintain transportation routes and to supply vital commodities. At the same time, the prosperity of the valley counties was heavily dependent upon the success of the mining counties. The development of the Sonora and Mono Road was the result of


SOUTHERN MINING REGION
Lake Tahoe
CALIFORNIA
NEVADA
Placerville
Sacramento
Aurora
Bridgeport
Bodie
San Joaquin County
Columbia
Stockton
Sonora
Tuolumne County
Mono Lake
San Francisco
Mono County
Stanislaus County
Yosemite Valley
Sonora and Mono Wagon Road
county boundaries
rivers
scale: 1 inch = 15 miles

increased awareness of this interdependency and a broadening of regional cooperation in the southern mining region.

Misinformation about the quality of the mountain route and the benefits it would bestow upon the region began with the first proposals for an immigrant wagon trail in 1852. Armed with scanty information, local merchants promoted the route through newspaper articles, handbills, and agents, claiming that the Walker River Trail was superior to all other mountain passages. In reality, the new trail was longer and more difficult than its main competitors, the Truckee and Carson routes. After achieving only partial success, attempts to establish a permanent immigrant route were abandoned and the trail fell into disuse.

Several years later discoveries of mineral wealth east of the Sierra Nevada Mountains rekindled interest in a trans-Sierra route, and attention shifted to the construction of a commercial wagon road. Again extravagant claims about the ease by which the road could be built were made. As surveyors and engineers began to investigate the terrain, though, more realistic appraisals of the expense of construction appeared. In response to the rise in projected costs, proponents of the road became more exuberant in their projections of the prosperity to be derived from it. Just prior to the start of construction, benefits from the road were predicted to quadruple San Joaquin County tax rolls in ten years and raise property values five hundred percent.[1]

At least a portion of the anticipated success might have been achieved if the road had been completed promptly after it had first been proposed at the onset of the mining boom in Nevada. Instead, the project floundered along a

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[1]Stockton Daily Independent, 13 February 1863.

course of mismanagement, distrust, controversy, and exploitation. Unable to avoid the hostility generated by the Civil War, road commissioners and construction workers found themselves caught in the cross-fire of opposing political camps.

Perhaps more of a hindrance to the timely completion of the road than the man-made obstructions were the Sierra Nevada Mountains themselves. Their rugged terrain in Tuolumne and Mono Counties proved to be a more formidable obstacle than anticipated, delaying both surveys and construction. Even after the road was completed, the steep grades, narrow canyons, and harsh climate severely limited its use. Humorist Prentice Mulford observed,

> The Mono road cost three years of labor, and was a fine piece of work. It ran along steep mountain sides, was walled in many places fifteen or twenty feet in height for hundreds of yards, crossed creeks and rivers on a number of substantial bridges, and proved, like many other enterprise undertaken in California, a failure.[2]

Despite the bickering and the hardships, the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road was opened for use late in the fall of 1864. The history of its construction is the story of the evolving struggle of the people of the southern mines to overcome regional, political, and natural obstacles to achieve a common goal of economic expansion. Although never as successful as they had anticipated, the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road played a significant role in the economic and social development of Tuolumne County as well as neighboring San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Mono Counties.

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[2]Prentice Mulford, Prentice Mulford's Story (Oakland: Biobooks, 1953), 207.

CHAPTER 1

THE OPENING OF THE WALKER RIVER TRAIL

Gold strikes near Sonora in 1848 and Columbia in 1850 brought miners swarming to the southern mining region, followed soon by merchants, lawyers, tradesmen, ranchers, and land speculators. By 1852, the population of Tuolumne County had climbed to 17,667 and the value of real and personal property had reached 1.6 million dollars.[1] Despite the apparent signs of prosperity, the winter of 1851-52 found property values depressed, business waning, and claims abandoned.[2] Frustrated by a shortage of water for their sluices, many nomadic miners had moved on to easier diggings. While ditch companies worked feverishly to bring a reliable supply of water from the mountains, community leaders searched for other ways to stimulate growth and provide a more stable economy.

Each year a migration of new residents from the eastern states arrived in California by one of the several overland routes. Columbia's merchants recognized that if a large number of the immigrants could be diverted to the southern mining region, they would provide the stimulation that was needed to lift business from its slump.[3] Two major trans-Sierra routes, the Truckee River

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[1]California Census, 1852; "Annual Assessment of Real and Personal Property," Exhibit E, Senate Journal Appendix, 1862, (Sacramento: 1863), 16.

[2]George H. Goddard to Augustus Goddard, 7 May 1852, Manuscript Collection, California State Library, Sacramento.

[3]Sonora Herald, 2 June 1852.

Trail and the Carson River Trail, had been in use for a number of years. Both led through the Sierra Nevada to the central mining region, bypassing Columbia, Sonora and other communities of the southern mines. Several northern communities had established additional trails through the mountains, drawing immigrants even further from the southern mines.[4]

Property holders in Tuolumne County realized that their situation would be greatly enhanced if they could divert a large portion of the annual overland migration into Columbia and Sonora. Famished wagon parties would be anxious for fresh provisions. Some might settle permanently in Tuolumne County, causing business to multiply and property values to rise. If the road became one of the main arteries between the eastern states and California, Columbia and its neighbors would flourish. Visionary residents could foresee their communities becoming among the most prosperous and prominent in the state.[5]

Residents projected other benefits as well. New settlers would bring needed skills to the region and create local products that were in short supply. Most of the overland travelers would be families with young, single women among them. At that time only 5 percent of the population of Tuolumne County were women.[6]

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[4]San Francisco Daily Herald, 20, 23 June; 5 July; 5 August 1852. In 1851 Beckwourth Road was opened to Marysville and the route for Nobles's Road to Shasta City had been explored. See George R. Stewart., The California Trail: An Epic with Many Heroes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 302, 305.

[5]Sonora Herald, 2 June 1852.

[6]California State Census, Tuolumne County, 1852.

In early June, 1852, Columbia residents, eager to ignite a boom of prosperity, delegated a committee of five businessmen to investigate the possibility of connecting the southern mines with the main emigrant road from the Missouri.[7] Information about the feasibility of the route must have been vague, for few had explored the mountainous region east of Columbia prior to 1852.

Early Explorations

The mountains to the east had been penetrated by an overland company as early as 1841 when the famous Bartleson-Bidwell Party crossed slightly to the north of the Walker River Trail and descended into the precipitous confines of the Stanislaus River gorge.[8] The chilling accounts of their struggle to survive the tortuous route undoubtedly dissuaded others from attempting to duplicate their feat. Even the sometimes reckless John C. Fremont, when advised by Indians that white men had ascended the mountains there, selected instead to swing north to cross near Carson Pass.[9] The mountain region around Sonora Pass remained virtually unexplored by anyone other than Indians until 1850.

Once the populations of Sonora and Columbia had begun to swell, though, hunters, trappers, and various wanderers inevitably began to probe the

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[7]Sonora Herald, 2 June 1852.

[8]Stewart, The California Trail, 27.

[9]Ferol Eagan, Fremont: Explorer for a Restless Nation (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1985), 204. Carson Pass is about thirty-seven miles north of the Walker River Emigrant Trail. The emigrant route crosses the Sierra Nevada just to the south of the modern Highway 88.

mountains east of the mining camps. The earliest recorded exploration was made in 1850 by "Major" John Ebbetts. Reference to this early excursion appears in his diary of an 1853 trip to investigate a possible railroad route through the mountains. Upon descending into Leavitt and Pickel Meadows on the eastern side of Sonora Pass, Ebbetts claimed that he recognized the area as country he had explored in 1850 when he had discovered Ebbetts Pass twenty miles to the north.[10]

Another early explorer of the region, George H. Goddard, perhaps not coincidentally, was also a member of the railroad survey team. During the summer of 1852, Goddard, a Captain Maxwell, and a Mr. Dawson ventured into the Sierra Nevada Mountains east of Sonora. They ascended the South Fork of the Stanislaus River to the summit ridge at an elevation Goddard estimated to be eleven thousand feet.[11] After several weeks of visiting mountain lakes, taking compass readings, and making sketches, Goddard and his companions returned to Sonora between the North and Middle Forks of the Tuolumne River.[12] An experienced engineer, Goddard might have been able to make significant contributions to trail discussions, but his trip was completed a month after the meetings in Columbia.

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[10]San Francisco Daily Herald, 19 December 1853. Today Ebbetts Pass is crossed by Highway 4.

[11]The highest point in the Sonora Pass region is Leavitt Peak with an elevation of 11,569 feet.

[12]George H. Goddard to Augustus Goddard, 12 August 1852, Manuscript Collection, California State Library, Sacramento.

Additional early mountain explorations came to light later in 1853. At a town meeting a Mr. Knight claimed to have made the crossing from the Walker River to Sonora "no less than seven times." Other men at the same gathering admitted to having crossed "more than once."[13] Some of these trips undoubtedly preceded any wagon crossings.

Columbia's Attempt to Establish a Wagon Trail

Armed with only vague information about the feasibility of a wagon trail over the mountains, Columbia merchants provisioned two parties to investigate the intended route to the Carson Valley. The effort was praised by the area's leading newspaper, the Sonora Herald: "It is confidently expected that in forty or sixty days, a portion of the advance line of the emigrants will be within our midst."[14] Despite the paucity of information about the mountain terrain, there seemed to be no doubt about the success of the venture.

Curiously a letter from Columbia, dated August 20, 1852, and published in the Daily Alta California referred to the expedition as a "relief train."[15] Relief efforts up and down the state drew popular support at this time, but their purpose was to alleviate suffering among the emigrants, not to sway them to one route or another.[16] The pretense of being a "relief train" may have been the

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[13]Sonora Herald, 11 June 1853.

[14]Daily Alta California, 21 June 1852; reprint, Sonora Herald.

[15]Ibid., 23 August 1852.

[16]San Francisco Daily Herald, 27 June 1852. Governor John Bigler dispatched eight relief wagons to the east side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in June, 1852.

writer's misunderstanding. The actual purpose of the expedition was clearly to divert immigrants to Columbia over virtually unexplored terrain, not to provide relief to their suffering. Whether or not the Columbia merchants had portrayed their mission as a relief effort, they had aligned themselves with a hastily contrived venture. Subsequent events suggest that their enthusiasm for enhancing their community had tainted their judgment.

The one individual in a position to make an accurate evaluation of the feasibility of the route was the man selected to lead the expedition to open the trail: James C. Morehead. Although Morehead's credentials seemed to qualify him for the task, some of his earlier activities call into question the soundness of his judgment.

The son of a former Kentucky governor, Morehead had fought in the Mexican War and then proceeded to California in 1849. From 1849 until 1850, he served as Assemblyman for the San Joaquin District, which then included Tuolumne County.[17] Later appointed Quartermaster General of California, he was ordered to aid General Joshua Bean in capturing a band of Yuma Indians accused of killing a notorious Indian bounty hunter. When local ranchers refused to provide supplies to the outfit, Morehead used threats and force to obtain provisions.[18] Later in encounters with the Indians, Morehead's inept

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[17]C. F. Curry, California Blue Book or State Roster, 1907 (Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 1907), 607; Joseph Allen Stout, Jr., The Liberators: Filibustering Expeditions into Mexico, 1848-1862 (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1973), 34-48. Morehead resigned from office on 16 April 1850.

[18]Daily Alta California, 8 January 1851.

military strategy permitted the Yumas to escape. In a ruthless pursuit, Morehead shot stragglers, sacked Indian villages, and destroyed their crops.[19]

In 1851, when Governor John McDougal took office, he initiated an investigation of Morehead and prepared to post a $1,500 reward for Morehead's capture because of misappropriation of funds. Somehow Morehead managed to slip out of his entanglements and organize a filibustering army to invade Sonora, Mexico. Failure to pay his bills, though, and difficulties in controlling his men caused the expedition to dissolve.[20] In May, 1852, Morehead was reportedly in Sacramento attempting to outfit a second invasion army, but apparently without success.[21] A month later he surfaced in Tuolumne County, offering his services to another hastily contrived venture. While many local residents may have approved of Morehead's posture toward Indians and Mexicans, the inept leadership abilities he had already demonstrated would contribute to the hardships suffered by the first wagon party to use the Walker River Trail.

Although two expeditions had been sent out from Columbia to explore the route, by mid-June they had either combined or one had returned, for future reports concerned only a party led by Morehead. In a June 23 letter he indicated that they had penetrated fifty miles into the mountains and were confident of finding a feasible route.[22] Fifty miles would have placed them at

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[19]Ibid., 20 January, 10 February 1851.

[20]Stout, The Liberators, 33.

[21]Ibid., 35

[22]San Joaquin Republican, 7 July 1852.

what later was to be known as Relief Camp, a valley on a tributary of the Middle Fork of the Stanislaus River several miles upstream from today's Relief Reservoir. The most difficult terrain of the route was immediately before the explorers.

By August 4 Morehead was camped on the Carson River, near present day Fort Churchill, attempting to entice immigrants to use the Walker River route.[23] During the intervening month and a half, he and his small party had covered 180 miles of trail, half of it through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Exactly how much exploration and trail improvement was done by the Morehead Party is unknown. A month and a half was adequate time to scout alternate routes but certainly insufficient to allow any significant preparations of the selected course. Later Morehead himself and one of his men became lost while attempting to retrace their steps on the route, indicating that they were not keenly familiar with the trail and that they had not even marked the route.[24] It is hard to imagine the Morehead party toiling in the remote mountains at any point along the trail before they knew whether the route would connect successfully with the main emigrant trail and before they knew if they would be able to persuade anyone to use it. The difficulty of some sections of the route suggests that Morehead's team may have only located a vague course through the mountains, leaving the specific wagon trail to be forged by the emigrants themselves.

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[23]Thomas Turnbull, "T. Turnbull's Travels from the United States across the Plains to California," Proceedings, State Historical Society of Wisconsin for 1913, (Madison: Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1914), 208-09.

[24]Nathan C. Clark, letter, 11 September 1852, published in Independent Press, 27 October 1852, quoted in Richard M. Davis, "The First Emigrant Crossing of the Sonora Pass," Chispa 14 (April-June 1975): 498-99.

Once situated on the Carson River Trail, the Morehead party was faced with the task of convincing immigrant parties to follow them over the new route. Certainly the disadvantages of the Carson route were known: belligerent Indians; a narrow, rocky canyon; two high, rugged mountain passes; perpetual snow banks across the trail; and severe congestion.[25] Years of heavy migration had depleted the grass along the Carson River Trail. With the sharp increase in the numbers of stock being brought west in 1852, the availability of water and grass had taken on added importance.[26] Morehead rightfully boasted about the abundance of water and feed on the Walker River route, but his claim that the new trail was shorter than any of the others was far from the truth.[27]

In truth the Carson River Trail was the fastest of the overland routes from the Humboldt Sink to the central and southern mining regions of California. Tributaries of the Carson River drain the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains immediately south of the Lake Tahoe basin. The main forks converge near Carson City, in the Carson Valley and then flow eastward into the Carson Sink. Emigrants taking the Carson River Trail turned southwest at the Humboldt Sink, crossed forty miles of desert, and met the Carson River near Ragtown, fifty miles east of Carson City. From there the trail followed the river

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[25]San Francisco Daily Herald, 15 August 1852; Thomas H. Hunt, Ghost Trails to California, (Palo Alto: American West Publishing Co., 1974), 156; Stewart, The California Trail, 205-206.

[26]John D. Unruh, Jr., The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860., (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 284.

[27]Clark, letter.

into the Carson Valley and then the West Fork to the summit of the Sierra Nevada. The main California terminus of the Carson River Trail was at Placerville, and beyond that, Sacramento. From the Humboldt Sink to Sacramento via the Carson River Trail was 240 miles.

The Walker River flows immediately south of, and parallel to, the Carson River, and eventually drains into Walker Lake near Hawthorne, Nevada. Morehead and his men were proposing that immigrants turn directly south, cross twenty-five miles of desert and join the Walker River near Yerington, Nevada. In all, the Walker River Trail detoured forty miles to the south of the Carson River Trail.

By 1852, overland parties were wary of trailside barkers like Morehead. Thomas Turnbull and his party, camped at a bend in the Carson River on August 4, were approached by Morehead and his men. Turnbull recorded the encounter in his diary:

> Some men came here last night that has run a road through to Sonora a nearer and better route for grass and not so mountainous but deception in people here can no be fathomed stopt all day some men came here from Sonora, Calif. and reckoned they had run a road over the mountains some 80 miles nearer to Sacramento it came right out where we were camped but Robert said that the old road over the Sierravado was bad enough but he was afraid that would be worse.[28]

Morehead, apparently never having crossed the mountains by any other route, may have believed that his claims that the route was "less mountainous" and shorter were true. In actuality, both statements were false. The Walker River Trail would have been nearly a hundred miles longer than the Carson

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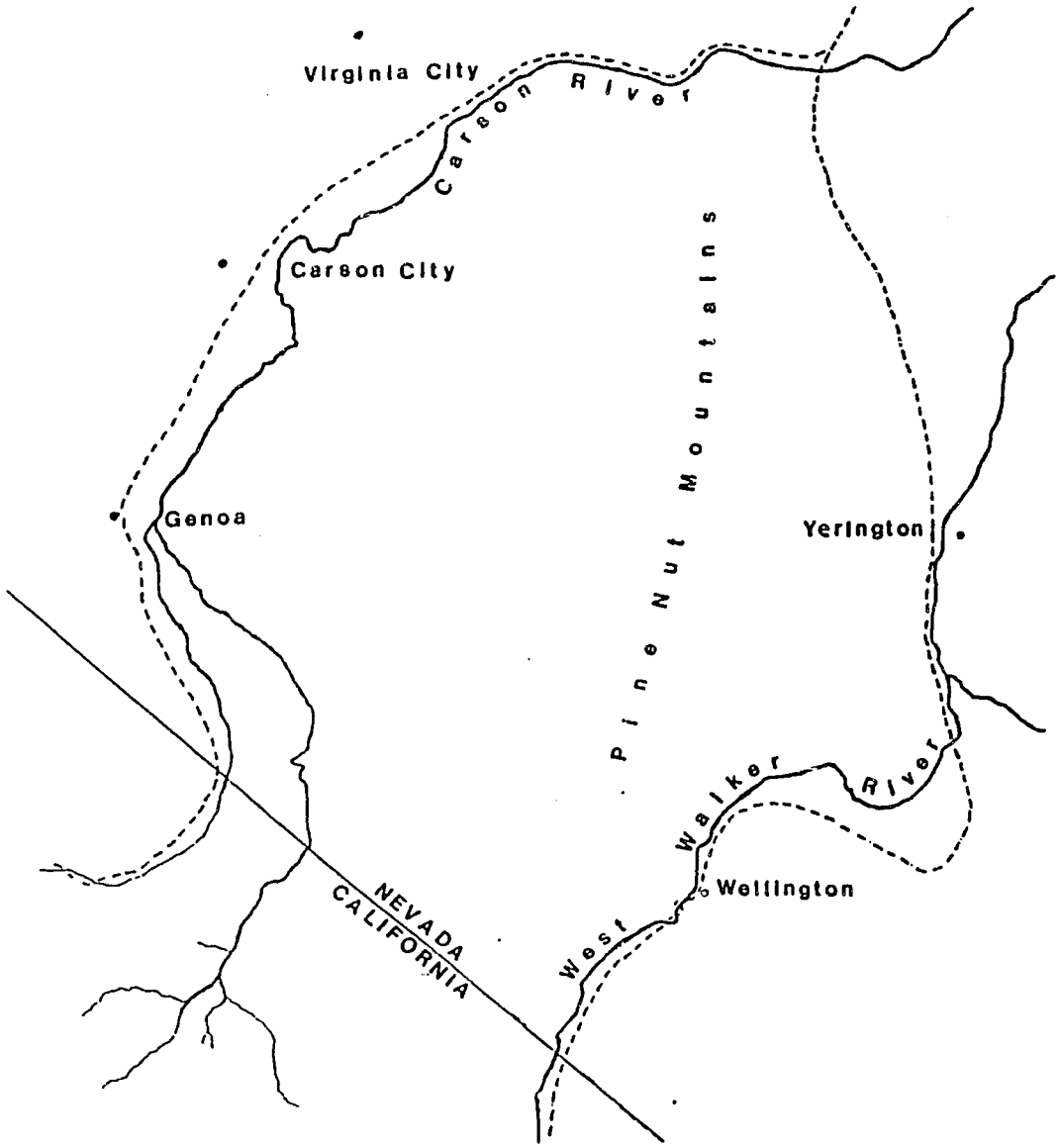
[28]Turnbull, "T. Turnbull's Travels," 208-09.

MAP OF THE CARSON AND WALKER RIVER TRAILS

NEVADA, 1852

SCALE 1 INCH = 7.3 MILES



route for those headed for Sacramento and forty miles longer for those destined for Stockton. As it turned out, even Columbia bound wagons would have saved time in 1852 by taking the Carson River Trail.[29]

The Walker River Trail was the highest of the trans-Sierra wagon routes. The main pass itself was 9,800 feet above sea level, while three other summits along the trail were all in excess of 9000 feet. Between the Nevada desert and Sonora, wagons were forced to climb nearly 11,000 feet, about 5,000 feet more than on the Carson River Trail. They also descended over 12,000 feet on the Walker route, which was about 4,000 feet more than emigrants had to descend on the Carson River Pass. The Walker River Trail remained above 6,700 feet for more than fifty miles, about fifteen miles more than on the Carson route.[30] The rugged ascents and descents on the Walker River Trail took their toll on emigrants, wagons, and animals.

The Elizabethtown-California Company

Unable to convince Turnbull's group to attempt the new route, Morehead then approached a party of fifty-four men camped nearby. After listening to Morehead's claims, they agreed to follow him. Known as the Elizabethtown-

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[29]After several days of rest in the Carson Valley, Turnbull reached Placerville on August 19, three weeks before the Elizabethtown Company reached Sonora. See Turnbull, "T. Turnbull's Travels," 220.

[30]"Sonora Pass Quadrangle, California," 15 minute series topographical map, United States Geologic Survey, 1954; "Tower Peak Quadrangle, California," 15 minute series topographical map, United States Geologic Survey, 1956.

California Company, the majority of them had come from prominent families living in Hamilton County, Ohio and neighboring Dearborn County, Indiana. Organized in March, 1852, the company had expected to complete the trek west in ninety days with their thirteen mule-drawn wagons. Many of the expedition members were young family men who intended to mine for a short time and then return home.[31] They were not the type of family settlers that Columbia's promoters had envisioned, but, had they been, they might not have succeeded in forging the new trail through the mountains.

Besides avoiding crowding and the hardships known to be encountered on the Carson River Trail, the Elizabethtown Company had other reasons for selecting the new route. In a letter describing their excursion, company guide Nathan C. Clark admitted that upon nearing California, ". . . we had, owing to extravagance and carelessness of our company, squandered our supplies, so as to leave us but twelve days of rations. . . ."[32] According to Clark, "Our party readily fell in with the idea of making the new route, and in a public meeting of the company, all of the members but two or three voted to do so."[33] Morehead had told them that the route was only 130 miles long and would get them into the mining region in eight to ten days. With supplies running low, the company found the new route a compelling alternative to the Carson River Trail.[34] In

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[31]Davis, "The First Emigrant Crossing," 496.

[32]Clark, letter.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

reality the distance of the route was about 160 miles, and it would be nearly a month before the wagons would roll onto the streets of Columbia.

Other factors may have contributed to the company's decision to abandon the Carson route. First, Morehead appeared to be a man who could be trusted. His credentials included considerable experience in the West and a renowned family name. Second, reports of Indian activity on the Carson route had been circulated along the trail. A month earlier two emigrants had been killed near Leak Spring on the Carson route.[35] Third, after months of traveling in the dust of others and with water and grass scarce, they may have found the prospect of a virgin trail particularly appealing. Finally, incidents of illness and death along the Humboldt may have swayed them to strike out on their own.[36]

A small family group named Brown, consisting of three men, two wives, and five children, decided to follow Morehead and the Elizabethtown-California Company. The Browns had three ox-drawn wagons.[37] Whether they had joined the larger company of men earlier on the trail is unknown.

The Walker River Trail turns to the south from the Carson River at present day Fort Churchill. After a twenty-three mile desert crossing, the trail intercepts the Walker River, which it follows, except for occasional detours and shortcuts, for eighty miles to its headwaters at the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains midway between Yosemite Valley and Lake Tahoe. The Elizabethtown

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[35]San Francisco Daily Herald, 9 July 1852.

[36]Ibid., 20 August 1852.

[37]Clark, letter.

Company found the first seventy-one miles mostly flat, desert land. A detour through the sandy Pine Grove Hills and a squeeze through rocky Hoye Canyon near today's town of Wellington, Nevada, were the only hardships they encountered. Water and grass were abundant, the Indians were of no concern, and wooded campsites were available at intervals along the valley.

Suddenly, though, near the modern town of Coleville, the trail veered to the southwest, leaving the flat river valley through a slot in the hills and climbing into Little Antelope Valley. Then, after only a short respite, the trail surged up a steep, brushy canyon that eventually brought the company to a ridge overlooking Lost Cannon Canyon. In less than ten miles they had gained over two thousand feet in elevation.[38] The trail led up Lost Cannon Canyon, crossed a pass at an elevation of 9,300 feet, and then descended into Pickel Meadow. It was here that the expedition bogged down. Clark's account stated:

> At the expiration of nine days, from the difficulties we were encountering and the slowness of our progress, we found our situation becoming somewhat alarming, our supplies "growing shorter by degrees, and if not beautifully, certainly fearfully small."[39]

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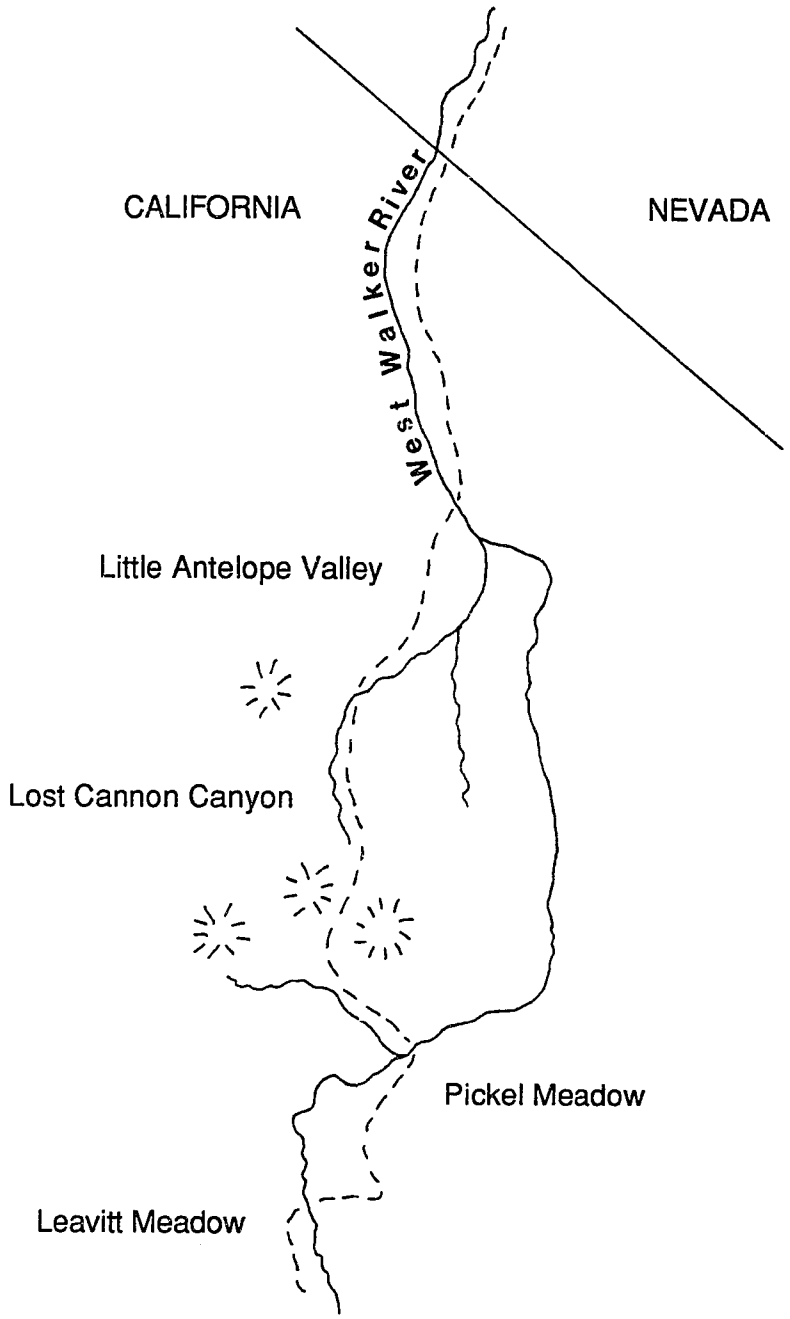
[38]Details of the topography and the route of the Walker River Trail are a synthesis of information taken from United States Geologic Survey topographical maps; George H. Goddard, "Map of Sonora Pass, 1853," Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California; George M. Wheeler, "Parts of Eastern California and Western Nevada, Atlas Sheet No. 56B," map, 876-77, Bancroft Library; and field inspections by the author between 1981 and 1989.

[39]Clark, letter. The diaries of two men (Browder and Williams) who followed in the next year in separate parties indicate that they also were able to reach Pickel Meadow in nine days. See William Browder, "Pocket Diary for the Year 1853," MS, Bancroft Library, 17 September 1853; Joseph Williams, "Dairy of Joseph Williams," TMs, Bancroft Library, 4 October 1853.

MAP OF THE WALKER RIVER TRAIL
NEVADA-CALIFORNIA BORDER TO LEAVITT MEADOW
SCALE: 1 INCH = 4 MILES



The company decided to halt and send a smaller group ahead to bring back provisions. A party of eight men, including Morehead, one of his assistants, and Nathan Clark, was selected to push forward on horseback to Sonora for provisions. Departing on August 15, they expected to reach Sonora by nightfall and be back to the wagons within three days.[40] In fact, they had nearly a hundred miles of mountain terrain yet to cover. At the least, Morehead and his men were disoriented.

Nathan Clark described their first day of travel toward Sonora over a route the wagons were expected to follow later:

> Our course all day, lay over mountains, precipices, and rocks where you would think it almost impossible for a goat to clamber--At three o'clock we ate one cracker and a half each, and traveled on until twelve o'clock at night, although it was very dark, when we were brought "all standing," by finding ourselves on the brink of a precipice, which the general [Morehead] nearly rode over.[41]

Clark's description of the trail affirms that the Morehead party had done little or nothing to prepare the route for wagons.

The next morning the rescue party continued, but after passing through Relief Valley they strayed from the trail and into the trackless canyons of the upper tributaries of the Clavey River between the North and Main Forks of the Tuolumne River. In the afternoon Morehead's assistant had to be left behind, too exhausted to continue. The others descended into a precipitous canyon where they eventually were forced to abandon their horses and continue on

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[40]Clark, letter.

[41]Ibid.

where they eventually were forced to abandon their horses and continue on foot. Finally on the fourth day they arrived at the Jarboe Ranch, south of the North Fork of the Tuolumne River and sixteen miles east of Sonora.

By evening they were in Columbia. Local residents rounded up mules, supplies, and a Mexican packer, and within another day the relief train was headed back into the mountains. On the seventh day after leaving the wagons, Morehead, Clark, and the relief train met a number of their party at Relief Valley. Having been out of food, the remaining members of the Elizabethtown Company had packed some of their belongings on mules and had set out on their own. Others had deserted the party earlier and apparently found their way to Sonora on foot.[42]

One man was sent back to Sonora with the empty pack train to obtain further supplies. The list of tools they requested, which included crow bars, picks, and sledge hammers, reveals the nature of the obstacles that remained to be confronted. While still others deserted and struck out on foot for the gold fields, fourteen of the original company of fifty-four returned to retrieve the wagons. With renewed strength they were able to extricate the wagons from Lost Cannon Canyon and bring them down through Pickel and Leavitt Meadows where today Highway 108 crosses the emigrant route. From there, the trail climbed up through a maze of canyons and ridges that eventually brought them up to Fremont Lake, still seven miles east and 1500 feet below the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. This four mile section of trail, as records of later emigrants confirm, was the most arduous of the entire route.

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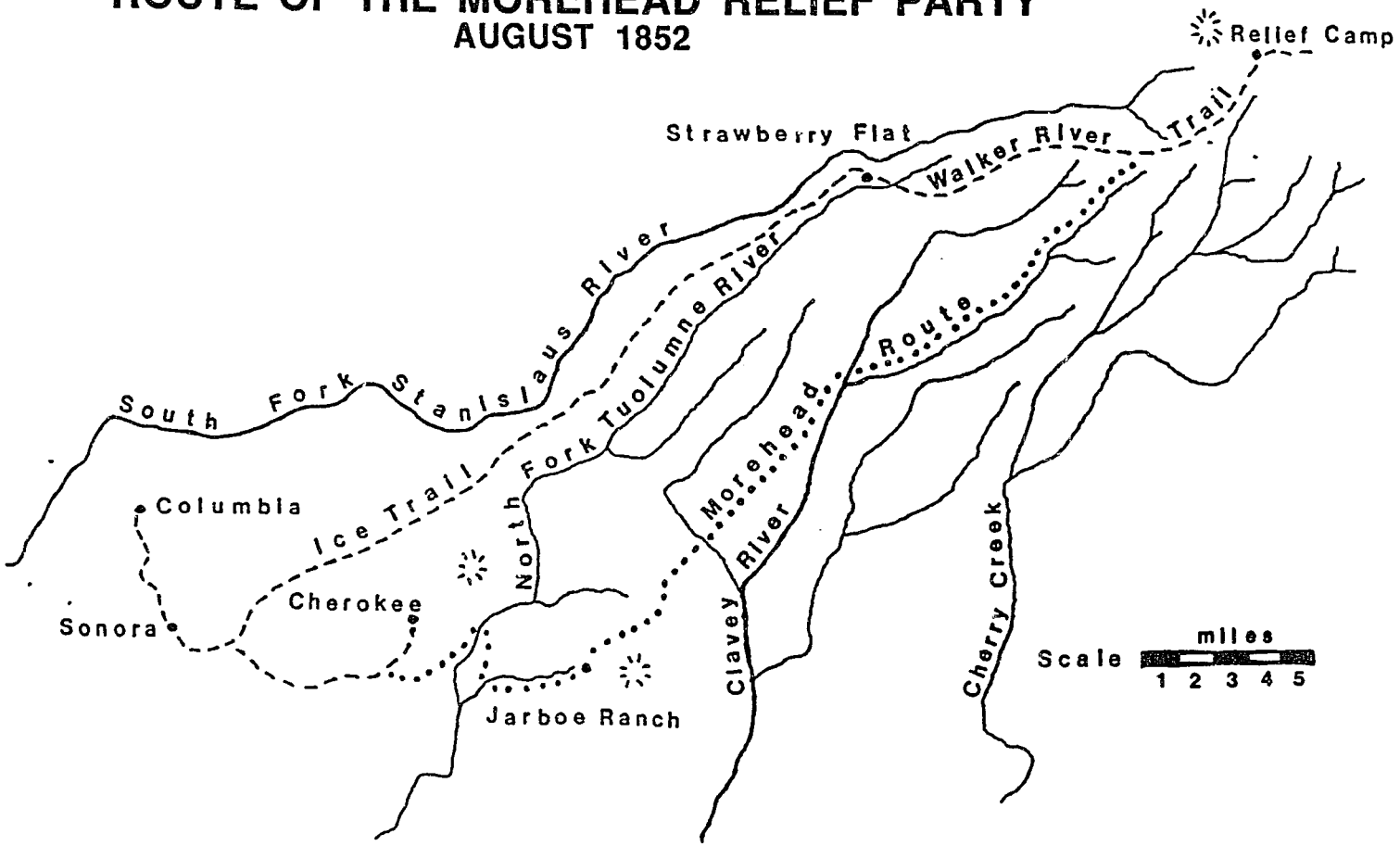
[42]Ibid.

ROUTE OF THE MOREHEAD RELIEF PARTY
AUGUST 1852



Uphill portions required double teaming or even the unloading of wagons, while the steep downhill portions could only be negotiated by easing the wagons down with ropes.[43] The narrow, twisting course among boulders and trees required difficult turns. At one point a 166 foot long stone ramp had to be constructed diagonally upward across the face of a granite cliff to provide a route for the wagons. A quarter mile beyond at Fremont Lake the steep slopes on either bank obstructed their passage. Ingeniously the men dug a short drainage canal, lowered the level of the lake by several feet, and then forded the shallow coves along the west shore.[44]

Beyond Fremont Lake the trail climbed sharply for a mile and then meandered among the lakes and ponds immediately east of Walker Meadow. The final approach to the pass led up through a deep canyon before emerging on the barren, windswept summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.[45] Eyes that turned southward were confronted with the peaks that today form the northern boundary of Yosemite National Park. From the 9,800 foot summit of volcanic cobbles the route sloped down to the broad grasslands around Emigrant Meadow Lake. Just beyond, the trail rose sharply again to 9,700 foot Brown Bear Pass. Then nine miles and two thousand feet of descent through the

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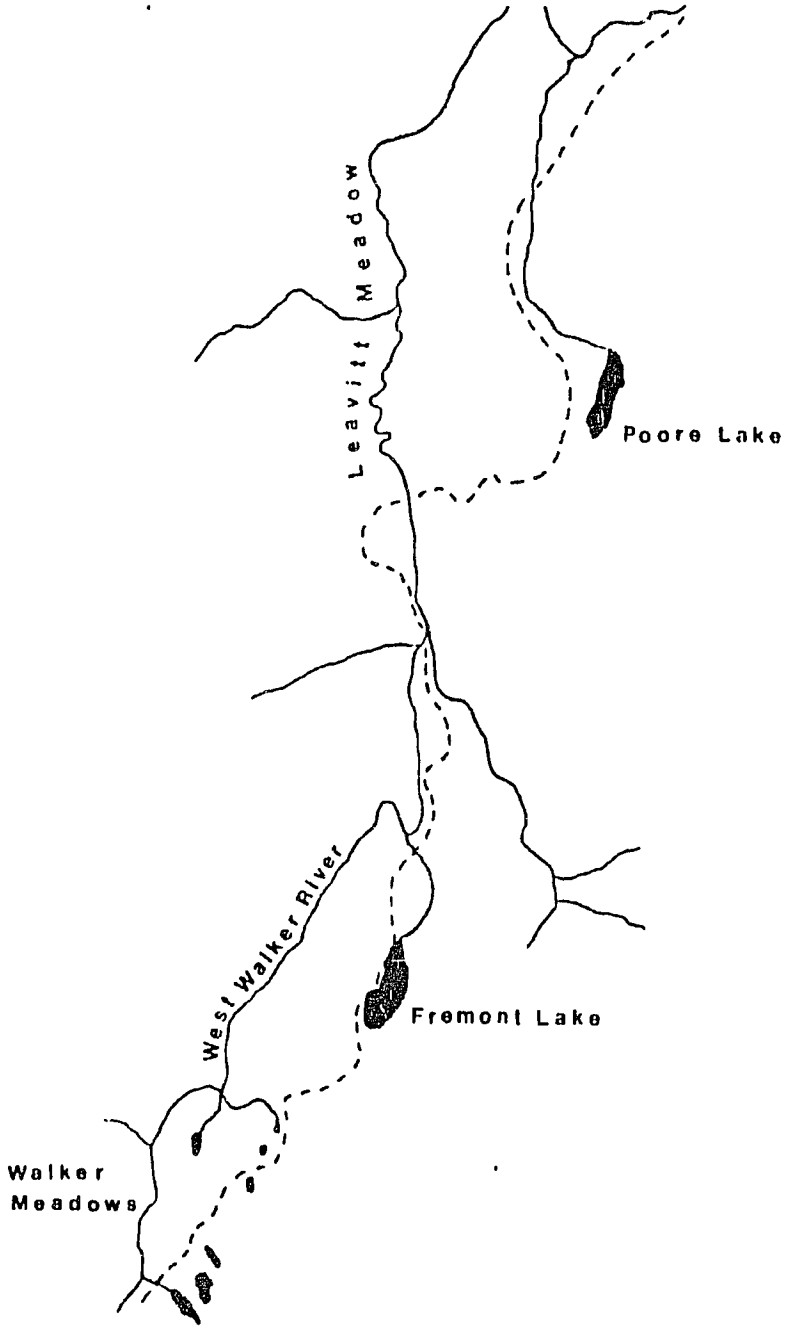
[43]Browder, "Pocket Diary," miles 417.5 - 420; Williams, "Diary," 3-4 October 1853.

[44]"A Trip to Walker's River and Carson Valley," Hutchings' California Magazine 4 (June 1858): 299.

[45]The "Emigrant Pass" indicated on the Tower Peak quadrangle of the U.S. Geological Survey map is incorrect. The emigrants crossed the summit one mile further north, a half mile northeast of High Emigrant Lake.

MAP OF THE WALKER RIVER TRAIL
FROM LEAVITT MEADOW TO WALKER MEADOWS
SCALE: 1 INCH = 1 MILE



jumbled cliffs of Summit Creek Canyon eventually brought the wagons to Relief Camp and out of the most difficult terrain. Although several uphill sections remained, culminating at Burst Rock at 9100 feet, the greatest portion of the trail followed sparsely forested ridges down to Strawberry Flat, near today's Pinecrest Lake. Local water company officials and others had probed the area around Strawberry Flat by 1852, but it still remained several miles beyond Tuolumne County's easternmost outposts. From there, though, an established road known as the Ice Trail led down to Sonora.

On September 9, twelve wagons of the Elizabethtown-California Company at last arrived in Sonora.[46] The wagons had covered the final ninety miles in thirteen days, a remarkable average of seven miles a day for men who were, according to Clark, "compelled to move some hundreds of thousands of tons of rock."[47]

From Sonora the remnants of the Elizabethtown Company proceeded on to Columbia where they were given a grand welcome. Clark recalled that they

> . . . rolled into this place preceded for the last mile by a procession consisting of about 300 of its citizens, headed by a brass band. After parading through with flags and music, . . . [we] were escorted to a splendid dinner prepared by the citizens. God bless them for their kindness and wholehearted hospitality.[48]

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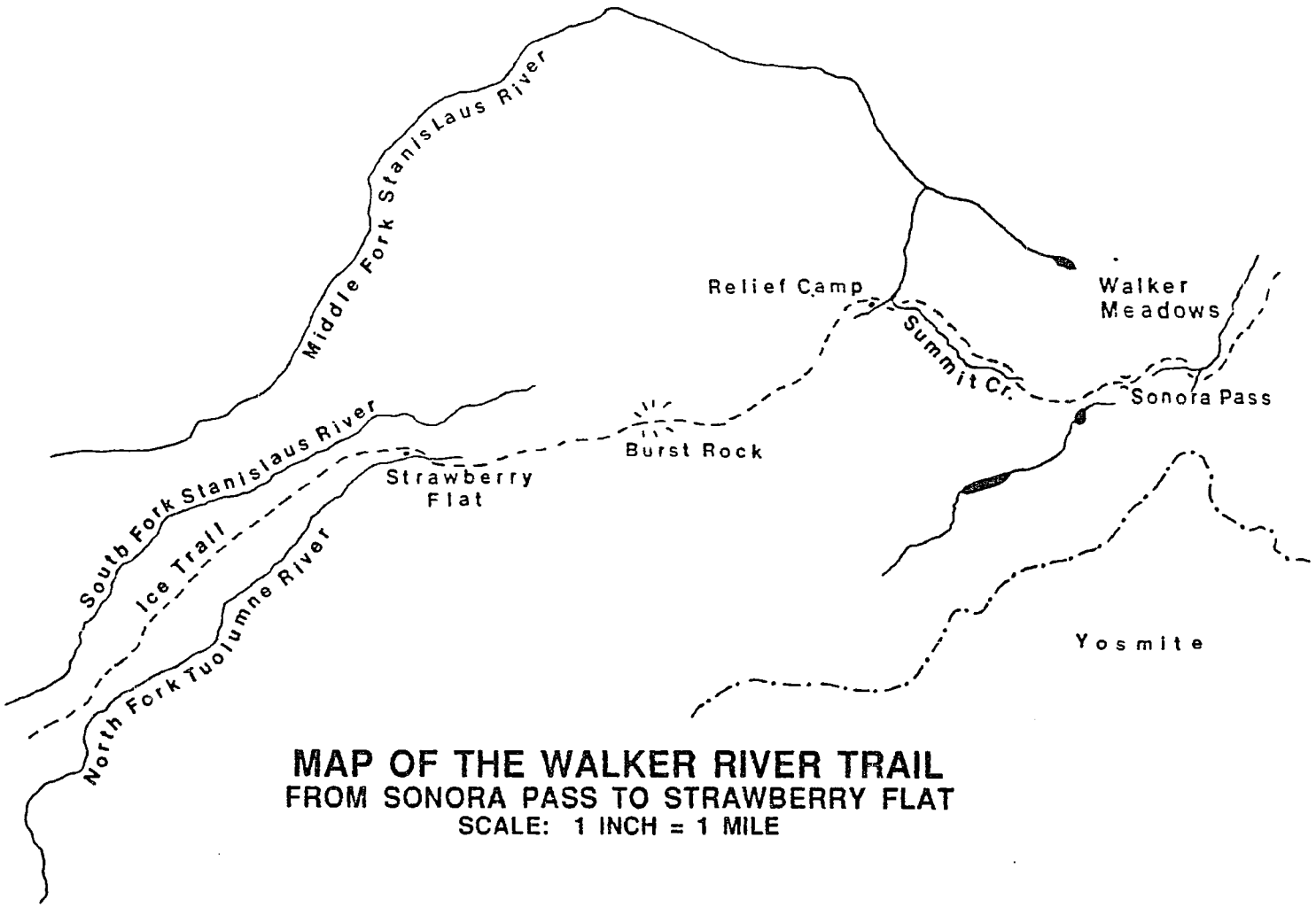
[46]The Brown Party followed about a week behind the main group. See Sonora Herald, 11 September 1852.

[47]Clark, letter.

[48]Ibid.



MAP OF THE WALKER RIVER TRAIL
FROM SONORA PASS TO STRAWBERRY FLAT
SCALE: 1 INCH = 1 MILE

Curiously absent from Clark's letter was any animosity toward Morehead or the citizens of Columbia for having lured them over one of the most arduous routes into California. Not surprisingly the Sonora Herald gave a favorable account of the passage, reporting that the emigrants considered the route "preferable to any yet traveled; and that grass and water [could] be found in abundance at convenient distances all the way through."[49] False reports about the ease by which the Elizabethtown Company made the passage would continue to be circulated during the next year as interested parties attempted to promote the route for the next season of emigrants. The Daily Alta California reprinted an article from the Sonora Mountain Whig which stated, "The road by [the Walker River Trail] is pronounced very good until within forty miles of this city; and even there with the outlay of a small amount of money it is believed a good mountain road could be made."[50] Actually the final forty miles were among the easiest on the route. In June, 1853, the Sonora Herald brazenly declared, "A party of emigrants with their stock and teams crossed on the route last fall, without any previous preparation, without blazing a single tree, removing a single rock, or removing a shovel full of earth."[51]

Despite the celebration at bringing the wagons into Columbia, the efforts of 1852 had not achieved what Columbia merchants had anticipated. Only a single party used the trail and no others followed that year. Most of the men of

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[49]Sonora Herald, 11 September 1852.

[50]Daily Alta California, supplement, 13 August 1852.

[51]San Joaquin Republican, 18 June 1853; reprint from Sonora Herald.

the Elizabethtown Company soon returned to Ohio or Indiana as they had planned, while only a handful settled in Tuolumne County.[52] Their numbers were too few to have had any significant effect on the faltering local economy. While California as a whole prospered between 1852 and 1853, as evidenced by a 48 percent increase in state tax rolls, Tuolumne County's economy continued to founder with a mere 2.5 percent increase.[53] For the southern mining region, though, a bold first step toward establishing a viable trans-Sierra route had been made.

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[52]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the U.S., Tuolumne County, 1860.

[53]"Annual Assessments of Real and Personal Property," Senate Journal Appendix, 1862, (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1862), Exhibit E, 16.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WALKER RIVER TRAIL: 1853

In 1853, the residents of Sonora took up the task of promoting and developing the Walker River Trail. Using money, propaganda, and emissaries at the Carson River, they succeeded in turning large numbers of wagons south over the Walker River Trail and the newly christened Sonora Pass.[1]

Sonora merchants, like those in Columbia, looked to the emigrant trail as a means to stimulate lagging business, bring more people into the area, and increase the prestige of the region. In May 1853, Tuolumne County received news of another inducement for developing the Walker River Trail. Gold had purportedly been discovered in Nevada along the route.[2] If the reports proved accurate, a rush of miners might soon be headed east over the mountains, followed by the usual freight wagons of trade goods. The Sonora Herald declared, ". . . Sonora itself cannot but gain in population and in prosperity by reason of the trade and travel which any extensive discovery on that side of the

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[1]The name Sonora Pass first appeared in print in September, 1853, and then referred to the 9800 foot high divide on the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the Walker River Trail, one half mile northeast of High Emigrant Lake. Today's Sonora Pass is eight miles to the north. Previous to September, 1853, the pass had on occasion been called Walker's Pass, creating confusion because Walker Pass already existed far to the south. See San Francisco Daily Herald, 3 August, 19, 20 September 1853.

[2]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 18 June 1853.

mountains, so near to our mountain city, must necessarily cause to center in this vicinity."[3]

News of the strike had been brought by James S. McLean and a Mr. McFaul, who argued that the route over the mountains could "readily be made the main emigrant route into this county, if the people of the southern mines [would] only come forward and assist in opening it."[4] McLean and McFaul were advocating an even longer cut-off than the original Walker River Trail, but the trans-Sierra portion would remain the same. Among the virtues of the route, McLean and McFaul proclaimed, were its gradual descent on the western side, an abundance of grass and water, and a savings of two hundred miles over other routes. They further added that it could be used for mail deliveries year round because of minimal snow.[5]

As was continually the case with the Walker River Trail, description and reality were at variance. According to the San Francisco Herald, in early June, McLean and McFaul led a company of twenty men across the trail where they encountered "incredible hardship and difficulties in ascending the mountains over snow and ice."[6] Six miles from the summit, finding the snow "forty feet deep" and too soft to support their pack animals, they were forced to halt. Half of the party retreated to Columbia to use the Carson route, while the rest reportedly killed or abandoned their mules and eventually pushed through on

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[3]Sonora Herald, 15 May 1853.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]San Francisco Herald, 15 June 1853.

snowshoes at night.[7] Not only had McLean and McFaul's claims about the ease of travel over the trail proved false, but word began to filter back from Nevada that the purported gold strike was a "humbug."[8]

As interest in the new route spread in 1853, others came forward with opinions shaded by regional prejudice. An article in Stockton's San Joaquin Republican reported that city founder Charles M. Weber had traversed the mountains by the Walker River Trail and declared it "practicable."[9] The article went on to say that Weber was "thoroughly acquainted with the country." Weber had been a member of the Bartleson-Bidwell Party of 1841 which crossed well to the north of the Walker River Trail.[10] Accounts of Weber's life indicate that he never returned to the high mountains east of Sonora.[11] Obviously Weber and the San Joaquin Republican were anxious to promote the development of their city. A wagon road through Sonora would have led directly into Stockton at the center of the main trade routes in the region and would have diverted business from their northern rival, Sacramento.

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[7]Ibid.

[8]Placerville Herald, 14 May 1853.

[9]San Joaquin Republican, 18 June 1853.

[10]William Guy Paden, "Bidwell's Route of the Sierras, a Field Study" (MA Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1940), 21-22.

[11]J. T. August, Jr., "Captain Charles Maria Weber - Pioneer" (MA thesis, College of the Pacific, Stockton, 1934).

The Sonora Expedition to the Carson Valley

As the migration season approached, meetings were called in Sonora to establish a committee to promote the route. At one of these gatherings a Mr. Knight declared that the trail was "accessible to trains, and that the few obstructions which lie in the way could easily be removed in two weeks; twenty men would be sufficient to perform the work in that time."[12] A committee of nine leading citizens was appointed to collect money, employ engineers to survey the route, and promote the project. Appeals were made to Stockton for assistance, and the valley community sent a delegation to Sonora to confer with the citizen road committee.[13] About $1,400 was collected from local residents to improve the road. Whether any money was ever actually spent for that purpose was not reported, but nearly half of the fund was held in reserve and used later to outfit a relief train.[14]

In June a company of men, including Sonora Mayor George Washington Patrick, made preparations to cross the mountains to the Carson River where they intended to meet their families and colleagues who were westward bound across the plains with stock and supplies.[15] Whether the rendezvous on the Carson and the use of the Walker River Trail were prearranged is unclear.

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[12]Sonora Herald, 11 June 1853.

[13]San Francisco Daily Herald, 18 June, 4 July 1853.

[14]The Pacific, 8 July 1853; Daily Alta California, 3 October 1853.

[15]San Francisco Daily Herald, 15 June 1853. Patrick could not have left until after July 4 because the Herald reported that he led an Independence Day parade in Sonora. See San Francisco Daily Herald, 14 July 1853.

Patrick and his partner, John Boyer, operated a merchandise store in Sonora. Earlier in the year they had sent John's younger brother, Frank, back to Missouri to procure supplies for their store, organize a wagon train, and bring the Patrick family to Sonora.[16] Frank Boyer certainly would have known about the Walker River Trail and may have been planning to use it. The firm of Boyer and Patrick would have benefited greatly from the establishment of a successful emigrant route into Sonora.

Upon arriving at the Carson River, Mayor Patrick and his party began distributing hand-bills to encourage immigrants to use the new route, but the Sonora emissaries found that they were not the only California town bidding for immigrant traffic.[17] By mid-summer representatives from various mining communities were scattered along the Humboldt and Carson Rivers, promising better roads and higher wages to those who would follow their advice. Mining town newspapers, salted with exaggerated accounts, were circulated among the immigrants by agents in an attempt to add legitimacy to their claims.[18]

A letter, written to the Sonora Herald in June by Samuel E. White, supposedly a citizen of El Dorado County, sparked a heated controversy between citizens of Placerville and Sonora. White claimed to have crossed the Sierra by many of the major routes, including the "Hangtown," or Carson River Trail, but he concluded,

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[16]Mildred Patrick Hanson, "George Washington Patrick," TMs, 17 March 1932, California State Library, 2-3. See also Tuolumne County Deeds, vol. A1, 220-221.

[17]Placerville Herald, 2 July 1853; Sacramento Daily Union, 3 August 1853.

[18]Placerville Herald, 6 August 1853.

> I consider [the Walker River Trail] to be the best leading into California. Its facilities for grass and water are peculiarly superior. It possesses also the lowest and most convenient pass now traveled by the overland immigration in crossing the Sierra Nevada. In other respects it is far in advance of all the other routes.[19]

After praising the Walker River Trail, White deprecated the Carson or Hangtown route. He claimed that, while stock would arrive in good condition by the Walker route, on the Hangtown trail

> One half must either perish by the way on this route, or be disposed of at a nominal price, the legitimate fruit of alkaline waters and abominable mountain roads, with which this route is lined. It is an outrage and a shameful imposition upon our suffering fellow-countrymen to advise them to enter California by the Hangtown road.[20]

Most likely this account was distributed by Patrick and his companions as soon as they reached the Carson River.

Placerville citizens retorted that the trip from Carson Valley to their town could be made in two days without undue hardship.[21] Then several weeks later the Placerville Herald editors located White and revealed that he had been a resident of Carson Valley, not Placerville, and that White had been offered five hundred dollars if his letter succeeded in turning immigrants onto the Walker River Trail.[22]

Undoubtedly the proliferation of opinions along the Humboldt and Carson Rivers about the various routes influenced the choices made by a number of

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[19]Ibid., 16 July 1853.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., 30 July 1853.

immigrants. For many of those who selected the Walker River Trail, the final 180 miles of their trek would prove to be the most arduous.

Emigrant Use of the Walker River Trail in 1853

In 1852, about fifty thousand emigrants headed out west across the plains for California, less than half that number followed in 1853.[23] At the same time, though, a record 300,000 head of cattle were taken west in 1853. While in 1849 ninety-five percent of the immigrants had been men, by 1853 fifteen percent were women and twenty percent were children.[24]

An estimated 2,375 immigrants used the Walker River Trail in 1853.[25] They tended to fit the general pattern of the overall migration. Many were families with children who planned to settle in California permanently. A significant number of the men had been to California previously and were making their second trip. Most brought at least a small herd of cattle.[26] They found the Walker River Trail no better than the Elizabethtown Company had left it. Joseph Williams, one of the few emigrants to leave a record of his experiences on the new trail, described the conditions of the route between Leavitt Meadow and Fremont Lake in his diary:

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[23]Unruh, The Plains Across, 120.

[24]Ibid.

[25]San Francisco Herald, 7 November 1853.

[26]Daily Alta California, 3 October 1853.

> Three miles to the river, very bad going down. . . . Two miles up the hill, rough road to descend, steep. Here you will have to let the wagon down with ropes . . . two miles to second steep descent, very bad hill to go down. . . . The worst road a wagon ever went up I believe.[27]

He found conditions on the west side of the summit no better:

> Three miles to a stony descent. This, I believe is the worst hill a wagon ever went down. Very stony and steep. One half mile you go up a very steep hill; one mile you go up a second steep hill; one mile you go down a steep hill into Relief Valley. . . .[28]

Another diarist, William Browder, described the trek up to Fremont Lake in similar terms:

> cross the creek again, then up a rough canyon and a very steep rough hill to go up, very bad, then down another steep bank to Walker's River and crossed over again. . . .
> cross Walker's River again one hundred yards. Bad crossing, go up the mountains to a lake. Very rough all the way and steep generally short pulls. You will find a great many wagons and valuable plunder throwed away. Rough all the way.[29]

Both the Williams and Browder parties made it through without mishap, but Mayor Patrick's family, moving more slowly on the trail, was not so fortunate. Concerned about his family and the condition of the other emigrants, Patrick sent a letter to Sonora requesting that a relief train be dispatched to meet the incoming wagons. Financed by collections made earlier for the development of the road, Captain McFaul and Mace Douglass led a twenty mule team to Relief

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[27]Joseph Williams, diary, October 3-4.

[28]Ibid., October 6.

[29]William Browder, trail guide, miles 470.5-473. Corrections in spelling and punctuation have been added for clarity.

Camp. Soon afterwards several other relief trains organized by private citizens joined them.[30]

As the Patrick family neared the summit, two feet of snow fell. Attired in badly worn shoes and tattered clothes, seventeen year old Helen Patrick became sick.[31] By the time they reached Relief Camp more of the Patrick family were ill.[32] For several days they rested in Relief Camp before continuing. Even so, Helen died on October 14, when the party was only one day from Sonora. Several weeks later fourteen year old Richard died also.[33]

In the Wake of the 1853 Crossings

Several parties passing over the Walker River Trail from west to east provided accounts of the conditions of the route in the wake of the migration. John Ebbetts, a member of the 1853 railroad survey team, described the area as "some of the worst mountains imaginable."[34] He reported that the road was "strewn with dead cattle, horses, [and] remnants of wagons" and concluded that "this route is the worst that could possibly be found."[35]

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[30]San Joaquin Republican, 11 October 1853.

[31]Mildred Patrick Hanson, "Patrick Family History," nd, TMs., 3.

[32]San Joaquin Republican, 11 October 1853.

[33]Hanson, "Patrick Family History," 11.

[34]John Ebbetts, "Journal," San Francisco Daily Herald, 19 December 1853.

[35]Ibid.

Charles H. Chamberlain, writing from Relief Camp on September 29, stated, "It was represented that a great deal of money had been expended upon the road, and that it was good the whole distance; while in fact, there has been nothing done, except to blaze trees."[36]

The following spring James Capen Adams, known as "Grizzly Adams," crossed the Walker River Trail while snow still covered most of the route. At an abandoned trading post on the eastern slope he found "On all sides lay old axle-trees and wheels, some broken, some perfect, melancholy evidences of the last season's disasters."[37]

An unidentified party which passed through several years later described what they found below Fremont Lake:

> The road from this point to the place of our encampment three miles below, beggars all description. How an emigrant train could ever get over it with their wagons, was, to us almost a problem. In this short distance we passed the wrecks of about twenty wagons, . . . while the bones of cattle were thickly strewn on either side. . . . In many places, had our animals made a misstep, they would have been hurled into a yawning gulf below.[38]

A decade later humorist Prentice Mulford recounted what he found along the trail in Pickel Meadow:

> The remains of wagons, broken wheels, iron ware, cooking utensils, and all the debris of emigration were scattered along the route. . . . How they managed to draw wagons over this rugged country is a wonder. A drive

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[36]San Joaquin Republican, 4 October 1853.

[37]Theodore H. Hittell, Adventures of James Capen Adams, Mountaineer and Grizzly Bear Hunter of California, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 228-29.

[38]"A Trip to Walker's River and Carson Valley," Hutchings Illustrated California Magazine, June 1858, 299.

> over the roofs of the houses in your city would be a pleasure trip compared to wagon navigation here.[39]

Although the trail had proved a hazardous route, it provided limited benefits for Tuolumne and adjoining valley counties in 1853. A substantial number of immigrants who had used the Walker River Trail settled in the area and contributed significantly to the development of the region. Many who crossed the Walker River Trail in 1853 had previously been local residents and had used the route to bring their families and herds of stock to their new homes.[40] San Joaquin residents welcomed the influx of new settlers, anticipating the benefits they would bring to the region:

> When we consider the character of this great body of people--men who have their wives, their children, their horses, oxen, cows . . . prepared to turn up our rich lands--who can estimate the benefit it will be to this part of the State. . . . The men are such as have been used to handle the plough and scythe; and the women are well acquainted with the use of the butter churn and cheese press; people who are neither ashamed nor afraid of labor.[41]

Demise of the Trail in 1854

Encouraged by the numbers who had used the new route in 1853, the following year Sonora citizens made another attempt at raising funds to improve the road. In May 1854, a convention was held at which an impressive list of committee members were selected to lead the campaign. Among them were banker Edgar Mills, politician G. W. Whitman, and Mayor Patrick. The plan drew

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[39]Dogberry [Prentice Mulford], Stockton Daily Independent, 1 June 1864.

[40]"The Press and the Sonora Pass," CHISPA 21 (January-March 1982): 717-20.

[41]San Joaquin Republican, 5 November 1853.

approval from nearby Stockton where the San Joaquin Republican argued, "It is no use standing in the street, grumbling at the dullness of trade. Let our citizens open their hearts and their pockets, and offer material aid to bring the western emigration in this direction."[42] Another meeting was planned for May 22, but no further reports about the committee were ever published.[43] The campaign to improve the road had perished without explanation. A few parties used the route in 1854, but by the following year competition from better routes to the north left the Walker River Trail virtually abandoned.[44]

The Walker River Trail never became the major artery into California that so many in the southern mines had hoped it would be. Eagerness to promote the road was rife, but the concrete improvements that would have made it a viable route never materialized. In a community with a depressed economy and a transient population, only the established businessmen were prepared to invest in the road, but their numbers were too few. Instead, the citizens depended on propaganda to turn a tide of immigrants south. Tuolumne County merchants and their agents had hoped that the emigrants themselves would build the trail, but the obstacles were too great to be overcome by the dwindling number of overland travelers in 1852-53.

Even if the money and manpower had been sufficient, the route itself had too many drawbacks to be developed into a permanent road. Narrow, rock-bound canyons would have thwarted attempts to establish adequate grades.

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[42]Ibid., 24 May 1854.

[43]Columbia Gazette, 20 May 1854.

[44]San Joaquin Republican, 16 October 1854.

The slopes were too steep and the turns too sharp. Obstacles such as Fremont Lake and the precipices in Summit Creek Canyon would have been difficult and expensive to overcome. Finally, the high passes and the extra forty miles of trail would have drained the weary immigrants.

As the number of immigrants coming west dwindled and the potential benefits of the trail declined, Tuolumne County residents turned their attention to other means of improving their business condition. During the next several years placer mining took an upswing and the demand for a substantial year-round supply of water became the major project of the county. Thoughts of building a road over the mountains from Sonora were all but forgotten.

CHAPTER 3

EARLY ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH A WAGON ROAD

While Tuolumne County's attempts to establish a wagon trail across the Sierra Nevada Mountains foundered, prominent businessmen in northern California were urging the federal and state governments to finance the construction of a road from Missouri to California. A few alert citizens in Tuolumne County made tentative efforts to capitalize on this movement but failed to rally sufficient local support to secure state-wide endorsement. Throughout the remainder of the decade, while other counties such as El Dorado took the initiative and established wagon roads across the Sierra Nevada, Tuolumne hesitated. It was not until 1861 that the widespread silver strikes in Nevada compelled Tuolumne County to move forward.

Although no concrete advances were made on a trans-Sierra road in Tuolumne County from 1854-1860, the events of this period influenced the later development of the road. Road promoters continued to disseminate the myth that the Sonora route could be constructed with a minimum investment. While such claims were intended to encourage interest in the route, at the same time these may have lulled local officials into underestimating the amount of promotional and financial support the road project demanded. The misinformation about the nature of the route that was broadcast in the 1850s continued to haunt road proponents when actual construction began in the early 1860s.

During these years of hesitation, Tuolumne County witnessed, and even encouraged, the construction of mountain roads by neighboring counties. The new roads eventually aided in the promotion of Tuolumne County's road by demonstrating the feasibility of construction, confirming the predictions of economic benefits, and fostering regional jealousy.

The Campaign for a Government Road over the Sierra Nevada

The stagnation of business in Tuolumne County in the mid 1850s had also been felt throughout the state. The total assessed property value in California peaked in 1854 and then began a two year decline.[1] Some residents worried that the state was losing population.[2] At a meeting of prominent businessmen in San Francisco on December 12,1854, participants agreed that a railroad could not be constructed quickly enough to meet the immediate demands of the state and attention shifted to an interim proposal to construct a wagon road.[3] Subsequent meetings in San Francisco and other parts of northern California echoed the call for the construction of a road from Missouri to California.[4]

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[1]"Annual Report of the Controller," Appendix to the Journal of Senate and Assembly of the Thirteenth Session of the Legislature of the State of California, (Sacramento: Benjamin P. Avery, state printer, 1862), Exhibit E.

[2]Sonora Union Democrat, 3 March 1855.

[3]Daily Alta California, 12, 13, 20 December 1854.

[4]Chester Lee White, "Surmounting the Sierras, " Quarterly of the California Historical Society 7 (March 1928): 4-5.

Proponents of the road argued that California needed permanent residents, the type who would travel overland bringing with them their families and their herds. These new settlers were expected to help cultivate the soil and develop the state's mineral wealth. A vocal proponent of the road in Tuolumne County argued that California presented "an asylum for millions of the working classes, who are now almost a starving condition in the older States."[5] Other road supporters noted that regions such as the Carson and Walker Valleys could not be developed until they had access to markets in California.[6]

Anxious to receive at least a share of the state funding for a wagon road, Tuolumne County citizens forwarded petitions to their state senator, Thomas Kendall. Consistent with earlier campaigns in Tuolumne County to establish a mountain road, their claims of the virtues of the route were greatly exaggerated. A. A. H. Tuttle, a Tuolumne County judge and founder of Tuttletown, declared that the "Sonora route. . . is beyond doubt the best route from Carson over to California. Twelve thousand dollars will make the route easy for wagons. The distance required to be improved is only ten miles. . . ."[7] Mayor Patrick, who had spearheaded the Sonora effort to open the emigrant trail in 1853, was slightly more realistic in his assessment of the route: "A large portion is as good a natural route as there is in the world; and a portion--say thirty miles--on the Sierra Nevada is as bad, but susceptible of vast improvement at a

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[5]Sonora Union Democrat, 24 March 1855.

[6]"Report of the Commission on Internal Improvements with Reference to a Road Across the Sierra Nevada," 10 April 1855, Doc. No. 22., Senate Session, 1855., 3.

[7]Ibid, A. A. H. Tuttle to Senator Kendall, 4 April 1855.

comparatively small cost."[8] Patrick estimated that twenty to thirty thousand dollars, "judiciously spent," would make the route easy passage for emigrant trains.[9]

A resident of Algerine Camp, writing under the pen name of "Richmond," joined his fellow Tuolumne County citizens in urging the legislature to select the Sonora route for state funding. In an open letter published in the Sonora Union Democrat, he argued that the Sonora route could be constructed for twenty-five thousand dollars. As evidence of its advantages over other routes, he claimed that in 1851 John C. Fremont had, "stated that this Gap--alluding to the one which is now called the 'Sonora' or 'Walker's River Gap'--from his observations at a distance, presented a more favorable appearance for a military road, than any other which he had discovered in the range."[10]

"Richmond" went on to detail the proposed route, the Walker River Trail. For a distance of thirty miles on the western side of the summit he reported that some large boulders would have to be removed, but that there will be no excavation or embanking necessary. He further argued that the eastern slope offered no more serious obstacles than the western side.[11] "Richmond's" assessment of the route, which ignored the numerous sections of near vertical

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[8]Ibid, George Washington Patrick to Senator Kendall.

[9]"Report of the Commission on Internal Improvements with Reference to a Road Across the Sierra Nevada," 10 April 1855, Doc. No. 22., Senate Session, 1855., George Washington Patrick to Senator Kendall.

[10]Sonora Union Democrat, 31 March 1855.

[11]Ibid.

granite cliffs, contributed to the myth that the Walker River Trail was a superior route to others already in use.

Support for the Sonora route came also from other parts of the state from individuals with no pecuniary interest in its development. From San Jose, J. P. Springer, a member of the Bartleson-Bidwell Party of 1841 which crossed the mountains slightly to the north of the Sonora route, claimed that he had made numerous trips over the Sierra Nevada and that the Sonora route was "equally as good as the ones now traveled."[12]

At the prompting of its electorate, the California Legislature passed a bill on April 28, 1855, which directed the Surveyor-General to investigate possible wagon road routes from California's central valley to the Nevada border.[13] The Legislature designated one hundred thousand dollars for road construction and another five thousand for the survey, but then failed to make the specific appropriations that would provide the money needed for the survey.[14] Lacking adequate funds to do thorough surveys of all the possible routes, Surveyor-General S. H. Marlette appealed to interested counties to provide crews, supplies, and other support. The consequence of this procedure was that the selection of a pass was no longer based solely on the features of the routes, but also on the degree to which various counties were able to promote their routes

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[12]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 14 January 1855

[13]S. H. Marlette, "Fifth Annual Report of the Surveyor-General of the State of California," , Seventh Session (Sacramento, 1856), 6.

[14]Ibid., 6-8.

and to contribute financial support to the survey team. Several surveys of northern and central routes were financed by local citizens or communities.[15]

Tuolumne County might have taken advantage of the limited competition, but, apparently unaware of the necessity of mounting an energetic promotional campaign, made only a feeble attempt at attracting Marlette to investigate the Sonora route. Believing he had strong support from his constituents, Senator Kendall appealed to Marlette to examine the Sonora route. The Surveyor-General responded in a letter: "In about two weeks, provided I receive sufficient encouragement, it will afford me great pleasure to visit Sonora and join a party to ride over the route, of the great advantages of which you speak so sanguinely."[16] Marlette spelled out exactly what he meant by encouragement: a party of ten to provide protection, a guide, a county surveyor, and expenses defrayed by the group. Expecting financial backing from Tuolumne County, Kendall announced to the Sonora Herald that Marlette would visit the Walker River route in June.[17] Apparently the requested "encouragement" could not be assembled, though, for Marlette reported that he never received a reply from Tuolumne County.[18]

On September 20, after having completed surveys of only the branches of the Carson route and the Big Trees route, Marlette recommended a variation of the Carson route on the South Fork of the American River via Johnson's Pass.[19]

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[15]Ibid., 9-10.

[16]Ibid., 11.

[17]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 22 May 1855.

[18]Marlette, "Fifth Annual Report," 12.

[19]Ibid., 19. Johnson's Pass is known today as Echo Summit on Highway 50.

Although a route had been selected, the constitutionality of the act providing funding for the road was challenged in court on the grounds that it would have placed California in excess of its constitutional debt limit. The California Supreme Court eventually found the road legislation to be "repugnant to the provisions of Article VIII of the Constitution of California."[20] If wagon roads were to be built across the mountains, they would have to be constructed at the expense of the local counties.

The Big Trees and Placerville Roads

Calaveras County was the first to take the initiative. In May and June of 1856, the citizens of Calaveras and neighboring San Joaquin County pledged enough money to forge a rough wagon road from Murphys to the Carson Valley, turning the flow of immigrants from the previously popular Carson River Trail.[21] In the meantime, at the urging of California citizens, on February 17, 1857, the United States Congress passed legislation for the construction of a wagon road from Missouri to California's eastern boundary.[22] Anxious to provide the California connection to the Great National Highway, proposals for roads came from communities up and down the Mother Lode.

In the spring of 1857, at the urging of San Joaquin County, a regional meeting to promote the improvement of the Big Trees Road was planned for

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[20]White, "Surmounting the Sierras," 11.

[21]Ibid., 13.

[22]Ibid., 15.

May 2 in Mokelumne Hill. Representatives were expected from Tuolumne, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Calaveras, Amador, Mariposa, Tulare, and Merced Counties.[23] Even before the meeting was convened, regional jealousies threatened to undermine the success of the conference. The Mokelumne Hill convention had enlisted the support of business leaders from Tuolumne and San Joaquin Counties, but a few individuals from these counties believed that the meeting should have been held in Stockton or Sonora. They feared that Mokelumne Hill residents would attempt to divert the road north through West Point to Mokelumne Hill.[24] Others were concerned about the number of delegates from each county, fearful that some counties might dominate the convention.[25]

Promoters of the Big Trees Road attempted to demonstrate the financial benefits its construction would have for all of the participating counties. A wagon trail had been completed over the route in 1856, but heavy winter snows limited its use and spring run-offs had eroded its bed.[26] Expecting fifty thousand immigrants to come to California in 1857, San Joaquin County was anxious to establish a mountain road that would divert traffic from Sacramento to the San Joaquin Valley. Stockton residents argued that the establishment of the Big Trees Road would "make the San Joaquin Valley the richest and most popular

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[23]Sacramento Daily Union, 7 April 1857.

[24]Ibid., 3 April 1857.

[25]Ibid., 4 May 1857.

[26]"Harvey Blood Built Pioneer Trade Center," Las Calaveras 36 (January 1988): 15.

on the Pacific Coast."[27] Even before the mineral strikes in Nevada, San Joaquin residents were looking at the trans-Sierra road as a trade route to Salt Lake City. If a commercial wagon road could be constructed across the central Sierra Nevada Mountains, traders, they believed, could deliver products overland to Salt Lake City at a price 25 percent cheaper than they were currently being shipped from Missouri.[28]

Tuolumne County's two representatives, Thomas Cazenau and William Luckett, did not arrive until the meeting was nearly completed. Upon learning that the members had decided to solicit money from the various counties and hire a superintendent to oversee work, Tuolumne County representatives pledged their support. Cazenau stated that Tuolumne County "was alive to her interests and those of the southern counties, and would do her share towards the successful prosecution of the work."[29] Cazenau's statement reveals that Tuolumne County had no plans to build a road of its own at that time.

Although Tuolumne County, and many others, had attended the meeting and appeared to be in support of the project, most of the money contributed to the Big Trees Road came from Calaveras and San Joaquin Counties. Nearly three months after the convention only a thousand dollars had been collected, all of it coming from San Andreas and Stockton.[30] A contributor to the San

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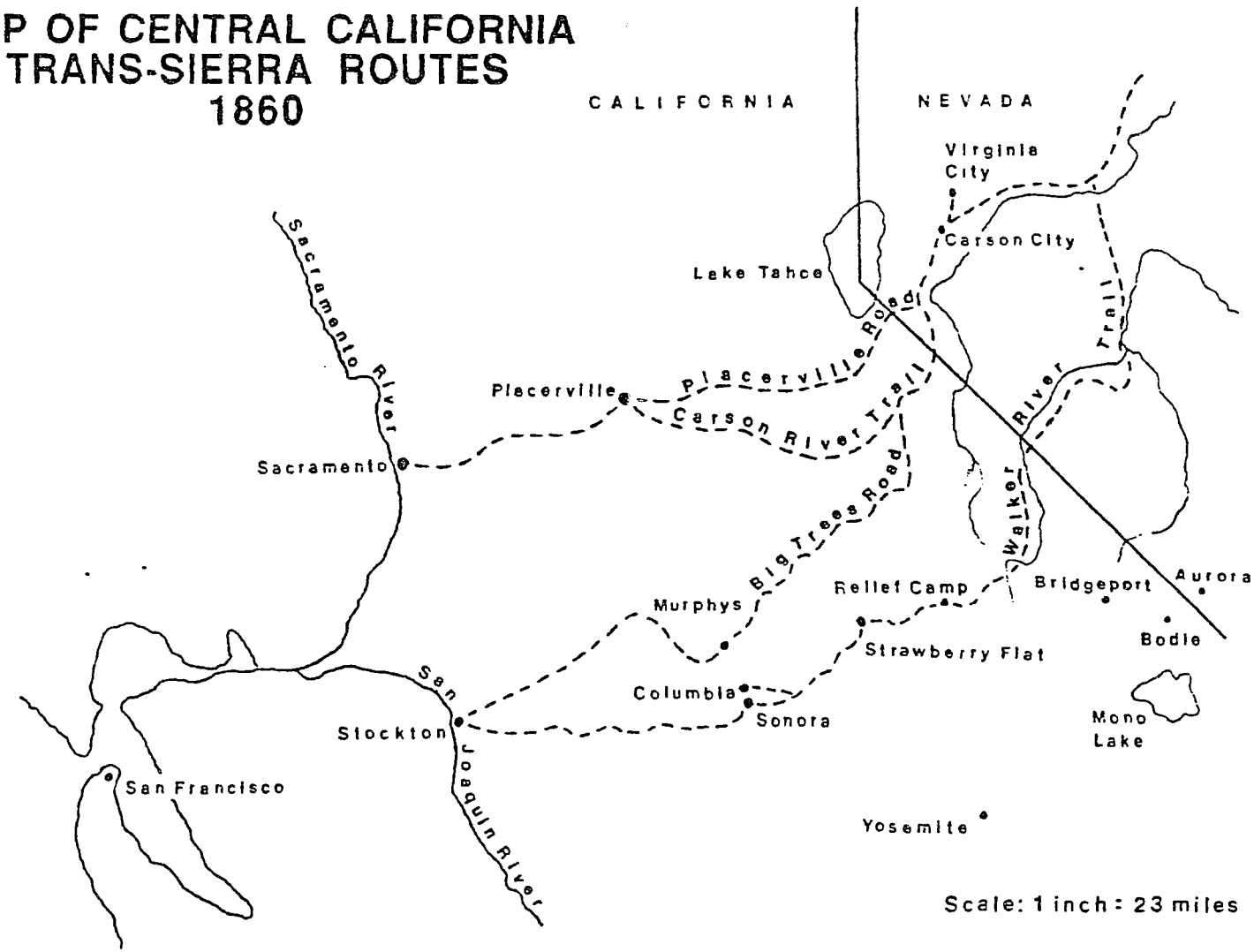
[27]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 3 April 1857.

[28]Ibid., 27 May 1857. The editors of the San Francisco Evening Bulletin refuted this proposal by a detailed account showing that traders from California to Salt Lake City would lose money. See Bulletin, 26 May 1857.

[29]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 27 May 1857.

[30]Ibid., 2 August 1857.

MAP OF CENTRAL CALIFORNIA TRANS-SIERRA ROUTES 1860



Francisco Evening Bulletin had urged San Francisco residents not to aid the project, pointing out that since politicians from the southern mines had recently voted in opposition to San Francisco on several important issues, San Francisco should not support the Big Trees Road.[31] Previously the Bulletin had been critical of the various counties for misrepresenting the quality of their roads for their own pecuniary benefit at the expense of the immigrants. The Bulletin concluded that the result of the numerous road conventions would be "more noise and confusion than real benefit to the immigrants."[32]

Even without any immediate road plans of their own, citizens in Tuolumne County could not have been too enthusiastic about contributing to Calaveras County's welfare either. Immigrants bound for the southern mines who used the Big Trees Road would be more likely to settle in Calaveras County than in Tuolumne County.

Using the money that was collected, though, Calaveras County improved their road during the summer of 1857 enough so that other counties, such as El Dorado, had to respond with similar projects in order to keep pace. Sacramento and El Dorado Counties combined to subscribe fifty thousand dollars to build a road from Placerville to Carson Valley. J. A. "Snowshoe" Thompson pointed out that if the Big Trees Road had not been built, "the Placerville folks would have been content that they would continue to climb the steep summit with their pack animals until doomsday. . . ."[33]

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[31]San Francisco Evening Bulletin, 26 May 1857.

[32]Ibid., 22 May 1857.

[33]Sacramento Daily Union, 27 May 1857.

Despite some difficulties in construction, the Placerville Road was completed in 1858, in time to win the government mail contract.[34] When the Comstock strikes were made in Nevada the next year, El Dorado and Sacramento Counties were in position to capture the majority of the trans-Sierra commerce.

Tuolumne County Procrastination

By 1858, Tuolumne County had little incentive for building a trans-Sierra Road. The Placerville and Big Trees Roads were more than sufficient to accommodate the meager overland migration. Although scattered gold strikes had been made in Nevada, none were substantial enough to stir great excitement. California mining communities, anxious to retain their populations, played down strikes in other areas. When word reached Calaveras County in 1857 that miners were headed for the Walker River, the local newspaper advised its citizens to "keep cool on the subject, and commit no rash act."[35]

Gradually, though, accounts of strikes in the Walker River Country began to spread through California. Prospectors struck gold at Dogtown on Virginia Creek as early as 1857, but it wasn't until Cord Norst found gold at Monoville just north of Mono Lake in 1859 that the discoveries attracted the full attention of the state.[36] To the north, the Comstock strikes around Gold Hill were made the

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[34]White, "Surmounting the Sierras," 18-19.

[35]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 23 August 1857, reprinted from Calaveras Chronicle.

[36]Maxine Chappell, "Early History of Mono County," California Historical Society Quarterly 26 (September 1947): 236.

same season. Within another year strikes were reported at Aurora in the Esmeralda district, just east of Mono County.[37]

Despite the rising excitement on the eastern slope of the mountains, for two years Tuolumne County residents made little mention of constructing a wagon road to connect the two districts. While trade passed regularly over the old Walker River Trail by pack animal, heavy or bulky items had to be shipped via the Placerville Road to Carson Valley and then south to Esmeralda or Mono.

Several reasons may account for Tuolumne County's lack of prompt action. First, strikes east of the mountains had been made as early as 1853 and had never resulted in significant discoveries. A letter appearing in the Columbia Gazette in the spring of 1858 declared that the gold discoveries on the Walker River were a "humbug," and that diggings did not pay more than three or four dollars a day.[38] Seasoned miners had learned not to leap at the first cry of riches. Second, by 1860 Tuolumne County was embroiled in a violent feud over the ownership of a newly completed water ditch. Many had invested heavily in the ditch, only to see it lost to capitalists. Few were eager to risk their money on another speculative venture such as a wagon road. Finally, with placer mining waning and quartz mining yet to reach its peak, Tuolumne County itself lacked the funds to finance a major project without outside support. By the end of 1861 the county debt had risen to $150,000.[39]

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[37]Frank S. Wedertz, Mono Diggings: Historical Sketches of Old Bridgeport, Big Meadows, and Vicinity (Bishop: Chalfant Press, 1978), 25.

[38]Columbia Gazette, 9 May 1858.

[39]Sonora Union Democrat, 22 February 1862. The 25 October 1860, Columbia Times reported the county debt at $200,000 for 1860.

Despite the lack of a wagon road, intrepid packers led trains of mules over the old Walker River Trail throughout this period to supply the remote mining communities in Mono County. From Sonora to Mono Lake required six days travel with loaded animals.[40] Because the trail remained above seven thousand feet for most of the mountain passage, it was rarely open to use before June and always posed a threat of trapping late season travelers in unexpected snowfalls.[41] Alternate pack trails included the Big Trees route and a trail opened through northern Yosemite known as the Big Oak Flat route, although both were as vulnerable to snowfall as the Walker River Trail. Those wishing to avoid heavy snow had to use the Placerville Road to the north or swing far south through Visalia and cross at Walker Pass at the southern tip of the Sierra Nevada. Apparently many did prefer the alternate trails to the Walker River Trail, prompting a writer from Mono County to declare,

> I am satisfied that pack trains can come through the Sonora Pass with as much ease as the Big Oak Flat or Calaveras trail; and horsemen and footmen can reach here in much less time and with less hardship. . . . And yet we find men from your neighborhood [Tuolumne County] coming round by Placerville and Visalia! If any more of the same sort are coming, I would most respectfully recommend them not to come direct but to go round via Cape Horn and the Southern Confederacy.[42]

By 1861, though, the success of the Esmeralda and Mono mining regions could not be denied and talk of constructing a mountain road was renewed. In the summer of 1860 significant silver strikes had been made in the Esmeralda

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[40]Tuolumne Courier, 24 September 1859.

[41]Ibid., 20 October 1860.

[42]Ibid., 13 July 1861.

district of Nevada. Soon 350 claims were filed by prospectors who swarmed to the region.[43] The main town, Aurora, quickly became the second largest city in Nevada. Isolated and desolate, Aurora depended almost entirely on imported food, lumber, fuel, tools, machinery, and other supplies. Two main pack train supply lines quickly developed, one running from the Carson Valley 70 miles to the north and the other from Sonora 125 miles to the west.

One of the main motivations for building the roads was the high prices being charged in the new mining communities. Located in comparatively remote and barren land, residents were forced to import virtually everything from food to firewood. In Mono County in 1861 flour sold for fifteen dollars per one hundred pounds, sugar for seventy-five cents a pound, and beans for twenty-five cents a pound. Fruit brought by pack animal from Columbia sold for seventy-five cents a pound.[44] Packers were able to carry goods from Sonora to Mono County for about five cents a pound, but a wagon road would likely have cut that amount in half and permitted the transport of heavy machinery, lumber, and other bulky items.[45]

San Joaquin County residents could see the benefits of a southern trans-Sierra road for their region. The Port of Stockton would serve as the supply depot for all merchandise bound for the new mining district via a trans-Sierra road through Sonora. The increased flow of commerce would consequently

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[43]Earl W. Kersten, Jr., "The Early Settlement of Aurora, Nevada, and Nearby Mining Camps," Annals of the Association of American Geographers 4 (December 1964): 496.

[44]Tuolumne Courier, 22 June, 3 August 1861.

[45]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 6 September 1862.

raise the demand for other services such as hotels and restaurants. With the sudden influx of miners in Esmeralda and Mono Counties, San Joaquin County would find a ready market for its agricultural products.

Mono County residents called attention to the need for a mountain road to Tuolumne County. A writer from Mono pointed out that "while the Columbians and Sonorans are sleeping, the merchants in other parts of California are sending large quantities of merchandise into this section of the country." Another writer suggested that a pack trail be built first: "Men who cannot construct a pack trail can never make a wagon road. . . "[46]

Finally, after much prodding in July 1861, the first surveyor was sent into the mountains to investigate a possible wagon road route. Several citizens from Stockton and Sonora joined to form the "Tuolumne and Mono Turnpike Company."[47] Sonora businessmen offered to donate up to $800 for the preliminary survey to be conducted by county surveyor John Alexander. Curiously, though, even before the survey team had departed, the cost of the proposed wagon road was announced at twenty thousand dollars.[48]

Expectations for the success of the Esmeralda mining region were high. Columbia and Stockton newspapers predicted that the area would become one of the richest in the world and that "thousands and tens of thousands of men will travel every route to this El Dorado."[49] San Joaquin County supported the

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[46]Tuolumne Courier, 13 July 1861.

[47]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 30 July 1861.

[48]Tuolumne Courier, 20 July 1861.

[49]Ibid.; Daily San Joaquin Republican, 25 July 1861.

construction of the new road, fearing that without it Los Angeles would claim the trade with Mono County.[50]

Predictions of rejuvenated business began to flow again. The Tuolumne Courier declared that the road would bring "a new era in the business history of Tuolumne County," and that "with this road in operation we shall no longer be wedged into one corner of the world." At the same time the newspaper cautioned,"If we delay and hesitate much longer, other counties will secure the prestige which it will take us years to recover."[51]

A week later the Tuolumne Courier predicted that Columbia would become "a great depot of the trade to Mono."[52] As evidence of this, the newspaper pointed to the success of other mountain communities such as Mokelumne Hill and Placerville, declaring, "Show us a section of country through which there is an important thorough fare open, and we will show you flourishing towns, increasing business, and an independent, well-to-do population."[53]

By November, Alexander had completed his preliminary survey of the road. His route followed the original Walker River Trail for a short distance past Strawberry Flat and then looped to the south and came up along the shore of Emigrant Lake, rejoining the emigrant trail at the summit. On the east slope, Alexander recommended following the old trail except for the difficult section

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[50]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 25 July 1861.

[51]Tuolumne Courier, 20 July 1861.

[52]Ibid., 27 July 1861.

[53]Ibid.

below Fremont Lake. The seventy-five mile route to Big Meadow he estimated would cost thirty-thousand dollars.[54] Although Alexander's route was later rejected, the survey helped to encourage interest in the project.

Just as Tuolumne County appeared to be on the verge of building the long awaited road, disasters arrived back to back, depleting the already strained financial resources of the county. On August 7, 1861, another of the terrible fires which had ravaged Sonora during the past decade consumed a portion of the city.[55] Then, the winter storms brought the catastrophic floods of 1861-62 which swept across the state, destroying mountain communities and valley farm lands.[56] Capital that might have been available for construction of the Sonora and Mono Road now would be needed to replace buildings, levees, and bridges.

Although ten years of endeavors had left only a rugged pack trail across the mountains east of Sonora, a number of changes had taken place in the last several years that would provide both the incentive and the resources to launch the road project. The most compelling factor was the mineral strikes in Nevada. The substantial wealth being extracted from the earth and the untold riches that presumably awaited discovery would soon convince even the most skeptical that the Nevada strikes would rival the California goldfields. A second important change that had taken place in the 1850s was the introduction of regional cooperation on public works projects. Previously, isolated communities such

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[54]Ibid., 16 November 1861. Big Meadow is today known as Bridgeport.

[55]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 10 August 1861.

[56]Ibid., 16 January 1862. Sonora Union Democrat, 18 January 1862.

as Columbia and Sonora had attempted to develop mountains roads on their own. By 1861, though, counties were entering into cooperative ventures, such as the Big Trees Road, that would benefit broad portions of the state. Eventually these forces would overcome the obstacles that had hindered progress on a trans-Sierra road in Tuolumne County.

CHAPTER 4

SURVEYS OF THE SONORA AND MONO ROAD ROUTE

By 1862, Tuolumne County had begun a downward slide in both population and mining. From a peak of over 3.3 million dollars of assessed property value in 1860, Tuolumne County dropped to less than 2.6 million in 1862.[1] Businessmen and property owners believed that Tuolumne County's economic revitalization was dependent upon establishing channels of trade that would link the county to prosperous mining and commercial regions. Persuaded by these arguments, residents of Tuolumne and Mono Counties in 1862 directed their representatives in Sacramento to sponsor a bill that would grant a charter for the construction of a wagon road from Sonora to Aurora. While disagreement still existed about who should build the road and what route it should follow, the project attracted popular support in both counties. Adjoining counties such as Stanislaus and San Joaquin were also interested in the venture, but they were not quite ready to plunge recklessly ahead with a hastily contrived plan. Their hesitation, coupled with dissension among the newly appointed road commissioners, led to further delays in the project.

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[1]"Annual Report of the Controller," Appendix to the Journal of Senate and Assembly (Sacramento: State Printer, 1862), Exhibit E.

Incentives for Construction of a Mountain Wagon Road

Although the motives for wanting the road had not changed significantly from earlier years, proponents had become more fervid in their exhortations. Several reasons accounted for their increased intensity. First, of course, was the undeniable success and expansion of mining in Nevada. In two years, Nevada's population leaped from several hundred to over sixteen thousand.[2] Next, residents of the southern mining region were well aware of the success of the Placerville Road. Because of the boom in the Washoe district, heavy freight and passenger traffic was crossing daily along the road from Sacramento, through Placerville, and over the summit to Virginia City. A Sonora newspaper claimed that property values had doubled in Placerville as a result of the road.[3] At the same time Sonora was considering her new road, supporters of the Big Trees Road were once again planning to upgrade their route to make it competitive with Placerville's. San Joaquin Valley residents, anxious to have direct connections with Nevada through any route, supported the plan.[4]

As before, local residents were convinced that a road from Sonora to Mono would improve business and raise property values.[5] Sonora businessmen believed that the new road would give them a monopoly of the trade to

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[2]Journal of the Council of the First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nevada, (San Francisco: Valentine and Co., 1862), 397-403.

[3]Sonora Union Democrat, 1 March 1862.

[4]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 6 March 1861.

[5]Sonora Union Democrat, 1 March 1862.

Esmeralda and Mono and even a share of the Washoe commerce.[6] According to one article, freight could be shipped along the new road for thirty to forty dollars less a ton than by the Placerville Road.[7] With all the commercial traffic and increase in trade, property values along the route were expected to rise sharply.[8] Finally, they predicted that once the road was completed "the government would doubtless make Sonora the mail route" because it would be the shortest road to Salt Lake City.[9]

Road Legislation and Preliminary Investigations

The question of whether the road should be built by the county or by a private company was confronted by two wagon road charter bills that were introduced in the state legislature. Mono County's Assemblyman Timothy N. Machin introduced a bill that would have granted a private charter to Charles M. Radcliff, Daniel O. McCarthy, William G. Heslep, and others to construct a turnpike road from Sonora to Mono County.[10] Radcliff, McCarthy, and Heslep were all businessmen in Sonora. Radcliff had been a pioneer of Tuolumne County and had served as a judge, merchant, and hotel keeper. Both McCarthy

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[6]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 29 June 1862.

[7]Stockton Weekly Independent, 31 May, 1862.

[8]Sonora Union Democrat, 1 March 1862.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Journal of the Assembly During the Thirteenth Session of the Legislature of the State of California, 1862 (Sacramento: State Printer, 1862), 262.

and Heslep would later play major roles in the development of the road, the former as the outspoken editor of the Unionist newspaper, the American Flag, and the latter as a maligned road commissioner. All three were Republicans, but their political affiliation was never discussed overtly in relation to the road. Challengers to their management of the road focused, instead, on the question of private versus public ownership. Opponents of the Machin bill were wary of another private company. Past experience had shown that they were unreliable. Also, they feared that the road would then become a turnpike, "dotted with obnoxious tollgates," something many felt would be a detriment when competing with other roads.[11]

The second wagon bill was introduced by state Senator Leader Quint, a Democrat and prominent Sonora lawyer. It called for the various counties to build a free road financed by property taxes. Opponents of this plan claimed that the region couldn't afford the delay that would result from holding county elections to determine whether or not to support the road tax.[12] Still others, including the Stockton's Democratic newspaper, the San Joaquin Republican, argued that the proposed road tax would be better spent on reducing road debts the county had incurred during the recent winter storms.[13] It was Quint's

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[11]Sonora Union Democrat, 19 April 1862.

[12]Stockton Weekly Independent, 22 February 1862.

[13]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 16 August 1862. Originally Mono, Tuolumne and Stanislaus Counties were to collaborate on the road, but in its final form, SB 412 replaced Stanislaus with San Joaquin County. See Journal of the Senate of the State of California of the Thirteen Session of the Legislature, 1862 (Sacramento: State Printer, 1862), 478, 518, 539.

bill, granting the counties the right to construct the road, however, that eventually became law on April 25, 1862.[14]

Under its provisions Tuolumne County was authorized to issue thirty thousand dollars of bonds; Mono County, eight thousand; and San Joaquin County, fifteen thousand. A board of four commissioners was to be appointed to "lay out, view, and locate, said road."[15] They were to meet in May and begin advertising for bids "as soon as practicable after plans and specifications have been agreed upon."[16] A final provision of the act granted the Boards of Supervisors of the various counties the right to levy and collect tolls to defray road expenses.[17] Passed in a timely manner, it appeared as if the act would finally permit the construction of the long awaited road.

Before the legislature had passed the road bill, Heslep, a frequent traveler to Mono County, had begun to preach the benefits of a variation of the route proposed by Alexander the previous fall. Heslep's glaring underestimates of the road's cost were accepted as reliable by the legislators and used to determine the value of bonds that would be authorized.

Heslep calculated that two thousand dollars would be required to improve the portion of road from Sonora to Strawberry Flat. Then from the flat to the Walker River, twenty-five miles, he indicated "some grading and excavation are necessary, but the greater portion of the distance requires but little labor." From

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[14]Sonora Union Democrat, 19 April 1862.

[15]Statues of California, Thirteenth Session, Chapter CCCXXIV, 439, 441.

[16]Ibid., 441.

[17]Ibid., 442.

the Walker River, Heslep proposed to follow the Walker River Trail to Antelope Valley, a curious detour until he indicated the next stop, fifteen miles away, as being Heslep's Mill. Although Heslep may have owned a sawmill in Antelope Valley, more likely he was describing today's Pickel Valley where his partner, I. P. Yaney, had located a claim.[18] From there he would have run the road on to Aurora.[19]

Heslep expected that he could build the entire 110 mile road for $44,000, and he confidently predicted that the road could be opened by August.[20] Although he had traveled the Walker River Trail many times, he had little appreciation of the difficulties of construction in the precipitous Summit Creek gorge and down the canyons on the east slope below Fremont Lake.

Nevertheless, Heslep's figures were accepted by the legislature when it designated $53,000 in bonds for the project. Sold at no more than a 15 percent discount, the bonds would have produced at least $45,050 in cash, a figure obviously keyed to Heslep's estimates.[21] Although a respected member of the community, Heslep was not an engineer nor a surveyor. He had been a merchant, flour mill operator, saw-mill owner, and quartz-miner.[22] He and his

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[18]Mono County Claims, Book A, 229. Pickel Valley had previously been known as Como Valley.

[19]Stockton Weekly Independent, 3 May 1862; reprinted from Sonora Flag, 25 April 1862.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., 31 May 1862.

[22]California State Census, Tuolumne County, 1852; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the U.S., Tuolumne County, 1860; Carlo M. DeFerrari, "Historic Sonora: A Glimpse of the Queen of the Southern Mines -- 1852-1900," Chispa 11 (April-June 1972): 383.

two brothers owned numerous properties scattered throughout Tuolumne County, including a sawmill at the base of the Big Falls on Sullivan Creek.[23] Unfortunately for Heslep, when the Democratic bill passed, his private company was precluded from building the road. Nevertheless, Heslep was an obvious choice as one of the road commissioners. He had established himself as the foremost authority on the project in the county. Tuolumne County's Board of Supervisors, controlled by Democrats, sought commissioners from their own party. Heslep, a Republican, was not chosen.

Investigation of Alternate Routes

Tuolumne County's choice for road commissioner was Henry Bradley Browne, a thirty-five year old Democrat, farmer, and lumberman who owned a ranch on the North Fork of the Tuolumne River, not far from the proposed route of the road.[24] Living on the fringe of Tuolumne County settlement, Browne was probably better acquainted with the mountain region than most local residents. Mono County appointed Zack B. Tinkhum, a thirty-four year old lumberman, formerly a postmaster in Columbia and later to become Mono County treasurer and sheriff.[25] Tinkum's experience with the route included a life-threatening

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[23]Tuolumne County Deeds, vol. 7, Tuolumne County Recorder's Office, Sonora, California, 270, 766.

[24]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census of the U.S., Tuolumne County, 1870; Tuolumne County Deeds, vol. 6 (26 May 1857), 238 and vol. 7, (30 September 1858), 758.

[25]Wedertz, Mono Diggings, 152.

crossing of the snow-blanketed mountains in the spring of the previous year.[26] Aurora's Esmeralda Star praised the appointment, declaring, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that Tinkum was "acquainted with all the hooks and crooks of the route."[27] Together Browne and Tinkum selected a third commissioner from Tuolumne County, William A. Clark. Well situated financially, the forty-seven year old Clark had interests in various properties in Tuolumne County.[28] In particular, he owned the former Dodge Ranch on Sullivan Creek near the route of the proposed road and had an interest in Bell Meadows, several miles south of Strawberry Flat.[29] Clark and Browne would maintain close business ties for the next decade.[30]

San Joaquin County's choice for road commissioner was Lyman H. Brannock, a forty-four year old Elkhorn farmer.[31] Brannock had previously been a resident and property owner in Tuolumne County and was probably known by some residents.[32] He had crossed the plains in 1853 and was, therefore, familiar with the difficulties of negotiating mountain terrain by wagon.[33]

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[26]Tuolumne Courier, 8 June 1861.

[27]Esmeralda Star, 17 May 1862.

[28]Tuolumne County Census, 1860.

[29]Tuolumne County Deeds, vol. 5 (16 July 1856), 236.

[30]Ibid., vol. 16 (30 December 1871), 409.

[31]San Joaquin County Census, 1860.

[32]Tuolumne County Mortgages, vol. 1, p. 497.

[33]History of San Joaquin County California with Illustrations, (Thompson and West, 1879; repr., Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1968), 120.

The commissoners had agreed to meet at Strawberry Flat on June 22, but deep snow forced them to postpone their exploratory expedition until July 7.[34] Due to the heavy, cold storms of the previous winter, unusual amounts of snow still remained in the mountains in July. Again the survey was delayed until July 17 when Brannock, Clark, Browne, and another individual investigated alternate routes leading out of Sonora. Browne and Clark, according to Brannock's report, were insistent that they consider a ridge to the south of the emigrant road, thereby bypassing Strawberry Flat while, in turn, passing through the ranches of the two Tuolumne County commissioners. To the dismay of Clark and Browne, Brannock declared the old emigrant trail shorter and easier than the southern ridge.[35]

Further up the trail, they encountered snow and, again according to Brannock, Clark and Browne proposed turning back only continuing at Brannock's insistence. After six or eight more miles, though, they found the snow so deep that even Brannock consented to retreat. Once more the expedition was postponed.[36] Unusual weather conditions had conspired to prevent the commissioners from completing their survey until late in the season. In effect, the entire year was lost.

When they did finally meet on August 22, Browne and Clark repeated their determination to force a route through their ranches, this time attempting a course up the North Fork of the Tuolumne River. "Insurmountable obstacles"

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[34]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 29 June 1862. Strawberry Flat's elevation is 5650 feet.

[35]Ibid., 21 September 1862.

[36]Ibid.

eventually obliged them to abandon the route.[37] Returning to the old Walker River Trail, they followed its course to Relief Valley across snow still four to six feet deep. At Relief Valley Brannock and several assistants attempted to find a route out of the valley that would avoid the "tremendous cliffs," but Brannock reported that the depth of the snow prevented them from locating a suitable pass.[38] In reality, no practical route exists. The trail from Relief Valley arrives at a virtual box canyon at the base of the cliffs below Saucer Meadow. The emigrants had descended there by using ropes to ease their wagons down a precipitous 630 foot long gully, too narrow and steep to accommodate a wagon road.[39]

Nevertheless, the next day the team proceeded to the summit pass where they were to meet Tinkum. When the Mono County commissioner did not appear as planned, Brannock and his assistants continued on toward Aurora while the Tuolumne commissioners turned back. Disagreement about the feasibility of the various routes had led to division between the commission members.

At Aurora, Brannock met with Tinkum, finding him "much of a gentleman."[40] No explanation was given for Tinkum's failure to meet them at the summit, but his misadventures the previous year probably had made him reluctant to venture into the mountains while they were still covered with snow.

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[37]Ibid., 29 June 1862.

[38]Ibid., 21 September 1862.

[39]Field survey by author, 15 October 1988.

[40]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 21 September 1862.

Discovery of a New Route Over the Mountains

Brannock claimed that earlier he had informed Clark and Browne that he had heard of an alternate pass to the north of the Walker River Trail but that the two Tuolumne commissioners denied that such a route existed. According to Brannock, when the Clark and Browne returned to their ranches, though, they were greeted by a party of men who were opposed the the route the two commissioners were attempting to divert through their ranches. The party prevailed upon Clark and Browne to investigate the northern route, which they did.[41]

Credit for the discovery of the modern Sonora Pass has gone to Andrew Fletcher, superintendent of the Columbia and Stanislaus River Water Company. According to accounts, Fletcher, his associate, Joseph Spier, and others discovered the route when on a fishing and hunting outing in 1862.[42] Both Fletcher and Spier certainly could see the Clark Fork portion of the route from Donnell Flat at the upper end of the water company works as early as 1855. Confusion about the discovery, though, is created by a passage in a biographical sketch about Spier written in 1892:

> In 1863, during the last of April, in the company of two others, Mr. Spier crossed the Sierra Nevada range on foot. There were no inhabitants for sixty miles, and only a blazed trail to follow. They had to carry their own blankets and provisions, and travel twenty miles over deep snow. On this

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[41]Ibid.

[42]Barbara Eastman, "Notes on the History of Columbia," Manuscript Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 10. Eastman relates that Fletcher announced his discovery of the pass in an 1862 issue of the Tuolumne Courier.

> trip Mr. Spier discovered a new pass, through which the Sonora road now runs, being near 1,000 feet lower than the one passed over by the trail.[43]

The Spier account raises numerous questions. If Spier and Fletcher located the pass in 1863, then they were not the first to explore the route. The road commissioners had already been over it in 1862. Although the 1863 date could have been wrong, other dates in the sketch from the same period were accurate. Also, Spier mentioned following blazes on the trees, indicating that someone had preceded them. Cooper and Wallace were known to have blazed the route. Finally, Spier claimed to have located a pass 1,000 feet below the one used by the trail. Sonora Pass is only a few hundred feet lower than the old Sonora Pass on the Walker River Trail, but 1,000 feet lower than nearby St. Mary's Pass over which a trail following the wagon road survey passed. That trail then had to cross the summit ridge at Sonora Pass. If Fletcher and Spier made their "discovery" in 1863, it was of little importance for the road commissioners had swarmed all over that ridge in 1862. The Spier account is not conclusive, though, and he and Fletcher may well have made their discovery in 1862. Fletcher owned an extensive sawmill on Sugar Pine Creek, nearly adjacent to Browne's ranch. The men who led Browne and Clark up the new route may well have included Fletcher and Spier.[44]

The new route diverged from the emigrant trail at Strawberry Flat, swinging north along the mountain sides parallel to the Middle Fork of the

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[43]A Memorial and Biographical History of the Counties of Fresno, Tulare and Kern, California (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., Chicago, 1892), 322.

[44]Various secondary sources credit Fletcher with discovery of the pass, including the sign posted at the top of the pass today.

Stanislaus River, then up the Clark Fork to St. Mary's Pass. From there the route dipped into the summit meadows, crossed the ridge at, or very near, Sonora Pass, and then dropped quickly into Leavitt Meadow where it crossed the Walker River Trail.

After having been led over it themselves, Clark and Browne guided Brannock, Tinkum, and other members of the party over the new route. Brannock disagreed with the other commissioners about the proposed route from the summit down the west slope to the main river. Brannock suggested

> taking a central branch of that river, which I will call Rattlesnake Creek, which forms a junction with the main branch some six miles due north of Relief Valley; and thence down the main branch of the Stanislaus five or six miles, and then any route most convenient to avoid what is called Eagle Creek, which joins the main river five or six miles below Rattlesnake Creek.[45]

Brannock's proposed route would eventually become the final route of the Sonora and Mono Road a year later when a pair of road commissioners "discovered" it. Further to Brannock's credit was his estimate of the total cost of the route. While others had been casting out figures ranging from $20,000 to $150,000, Brannock put the cost at least $250,000, a figure that would eventually prove to be the only accurate projection of costs made by anyone involved with the road.[46]

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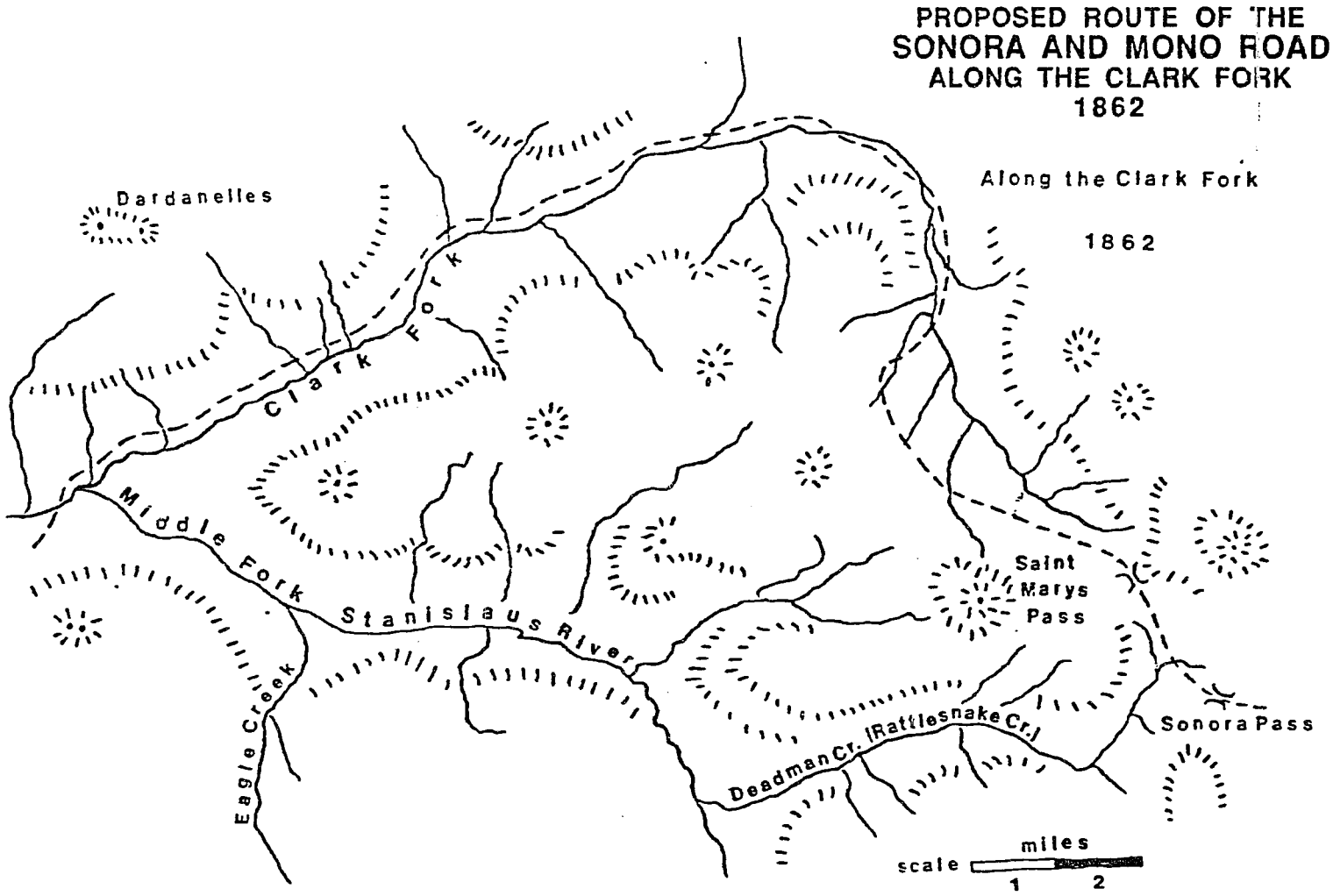
[45]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 21 September 1862.

[46]Ibid.


PROPOSED ROUTE OF THE
SONORA AND MONO ROAD
ALONG THE CLARK FORK
1862
Along the Clark Fork
1862
Dardanelles
Clark Fork
Middle Fork Stanislaus River
Eagle Creek
Saint Marys Pass
Sonora Pass
Deadman Cr.
Rattlesnake Cr.
scale
miles
1
2

Tuolumne County residents, afraid that Brannock's report would diminish support in the San Joaquin Valley and even in Tuolumne County, were quick to refute his opinions. Sonora's Union Democrat retorted,

> All who have been over the proposed route, and are familiar with the construction of mountain wagon roads, differ materially from Mr. Brannock's statement, in their estimate of the probable cost. We are assured that a good wagon road can be made on the proposed route between Tuolumne and Mono for $50,000, one-fifth the amount stated by the San Joaquin Commissioner.[47]

Browne's and Clark' s report was not published until two months after Brannock's had appeared in a Stockton newspaper. Not surprisingly, they were somewhat contemptuous of Brannock and even Tinkum. In the original report, they had written that Mono and San Joaquin County "had not sent men that were practical."[48] Then they had lightly crossed out the words, leaving them still legible in the report. They claimed that Brannock had left them on the summit, "expressing himself satisfied of the impossibility to build the proposed road, without an examination."[49] If Brannock's opinion was that the road could not be built along the course of the Walker River Trail, he was well founded in his conclusion.

When Tinkum and Brannock had rejoined the others, Clark and Brown claimed that Tinkum, after accompanying them seven miles west of the summit,

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[47]Sonora Union Democrat, 4 October 1862.

[48]Don J. Baxter, ed., Gateways to California (San Francisco: Pacific Gas and Electric Company, 1968), 15.

[49]Sonora Union Democrat, 8 November 1862.

had concluded that the road would be too expensive and returned to Mono County. While, according to Clark and Browne,

> Mr. Brannock. . . who had never been over all of the road explored by us, went to his own county and reported adversely to the project, at the same time recommending that if the road should be built, it should be built up a place he called Rattlesnake Creek, a place which he never has been at, except its mouth, to this present time; a creek that it is impossible to build a road on, as we have examined it from end to end.[50]

Clark and Browne were careful to include a description of the discomforts they had endured while surveying the route. According to their report, the pair had spent "seventy-six days in the mountains. . . sometimes without provisions, and sometimes without anything to cover us at night, amid snows and storms. It has been a duty fraught with hardships and exposure."[51]

The Cooper and Wallace Survey

Satisfied that the best route had been located, Tuolumne County Supervisors named Judge James Lane of Sonora as superintendent of the project. In late September he set out with a crew of from fifteen to twenty men to clear a stock trail along the route.[52] Their intention was twofold. By establishing a pack trail, they could encourage the flow of commerce over the route even

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[50]Ibid.

[51] bid.

[52]Ibid., 4 October 1862.

before a road had been completed, while at the same time provide a clear path which the surveyors could use for a more detailed evaluation of the route.

The road commissioners engaged the services of County Surveyor William S. Cooper and former Tuolumne County Water Company chief engineer John Wallace to survey the route, make a map, and arrive at an estimated cost.[53] Both were men with considerable experience in mountain surveying and construction. Following the route recommended by the road commissioners, the two men completed a preliminary survey and presented a written report that would be the source of future misunderstandings and controversies.

The team of surveyors bypassed the section from Sonora to Strawberry Flat, noting that an adequate road already existed which could be improved for "a moderate expense."[54] From Strawberry Flat to what would become known as Fales Hot Springs on the eastern side of the mountains, the two engineers surveyed fifty-four miles of difficult mountain terrain, noting several sections which would require "heavy and expensive grading." Although their survey stopped at the hot springs, they indicated that the thirty miles beyond to Aurora offered no particular obstacles.[55] In summary they stated,

> It would be impossible from this survey to make any correct estimate of the cost of constructing the road, from the fact that the location will probably be changed in many points when the final survey is made, but from a careful observation of the general character of the route and the

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[53]Ibid., 8 November 1862.

[54]Sonora Union Democrat, 25 October 1862, report of Cooper and Wallace dated 20 October 1862.

[55]Ibid.

> obstacles to be overcome, we should set down the total cost of the road at one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.[56]

At the same time they also completed a detailed map of the portion of the route they had surveyed.[57] The errors and ambiguity of the map would also contribute to future disagreements.

The report of the two engineers raised another problem. Having based their estimates of the cost of the road on laymen's recommendations, the legislature had only authorized $50,000 in bonds. Furthermore, the statute had granted San Joaquin County the option of withdrawing from the venture, leaving even a greater gap between the available funds and the estimated cost of the road.[58] The counties would be forced to wait until the next session of the legislature before another bill could be introduced to provide funding for the road. The delay was inconsequential, though, for little could have been accomplished that season even if the funding had been available. By November, winter snows had begun to fall in the mountains.

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[56]Ibid.

[57]An original copy of this map hangs in the Recorder's Office, Tuolumne County Building, Sonora, California.

[58]Statutes of California, Thirteenth Session, Chapter CCCXXIV.

CHAPTER 5

THE FIRST PHASE OF ROAD CONSTRUCTION

By the summer of 1863, after a decade of delays, the Sonora and Mono road project finally appeared to have been launched successfully. Bond money had been approved, detailed surveys had been completed, contracts were being let, and labor crews were toiling in the mountains; but eager residents were too distracted by anticipated prosperity to heed the clouds of controversy that had been gathering on several different horizons. Before the end of the year the half-completed project was challenged by allegations of mismanagement and corruption, embroiled in Civil War antipathies, and eventually stalled by bankruptcy.

Over the years political concerns had occasionally influenced the road project, but economic considerations had always been the driving force that had dictated the course of its development. For the first eight months of 1863, financial interests continued to dictate road policy. Arguments about the benefits to be derived from the road persuaded the residents of four counties to pledge substantial financial support even before a thorough survey of the route or projection of costs had been completed. Anticipation of a steady flow of commerce over the new route prompted the rapid settlement of land up and down the road's projected course. Road proponents, convinced of the potential for unparalleled growth, ignored the cautions listed in the fine print of earlier survey reports and continued to boast of the ease with which the road could be

built and the natural advantages of its features. For those waiting anxiously with open pocketbooks for the road to be completed, the apparent collapse of the project in the fall of 1863 came as a harsh surprise.

The Campaign to Win San Joaquin County's Support

The basic economic theme put forward by proponents of the road had already been well rehearsed by 1863: the sagging economy of the southern mining region would be revitalized by the construction of a trans-Sierra road. Supporters of the project in 1863, though, had both new evidence and additional motivation which prompted them to raise expectations about the potential success of the road even higher than had been predicted in previous years.

One of the most significant of these motivations was the increased scope of the undertaking. In the early years when the projected cost of the road had been only a few thousand dollars, advocates of the project needed only to offer modest rewards as an inducement for its construction. When surveyors in 1862 indicated that $150,000 would be needed to establish the road, promoters were forced to keep pace by promising even greater riches in return for the investment.

A second motivation which encouraged road promoters to raise expectations about the road was that San Joaquin and Stanislaus County leaders had decided to allow the voters to determine whether they would support the Sonora and Mono Road or not. The endorsement of San Joaquin County was both crucial and uncertain. Without its financial backing, the road

project would probably collapse. Many presumed that San Joaquin voters were apathetic to the project.[1] The Stockton Daily Independent attempted to awaken San Joaquin County from "her long and stupid sleep of ten years" with arguments in favor of the road.[2] The editors pointed out that "if we desire to keep pace with our ambitious neighbors north of us; if we would make this city the populous, flourishing and wealthy mart which its friends predict it will become, we must help ourselves. . . ."[3] Others thought that some San Joaquin voters, especially in light of Brannock's report, were even opposed to the Sonora and Mono Road.[4]

San Joaquin County had been deluged with proposals for various transportation projects. In addition to the Sonora and Mono Road, citizens were being asked to vote on whether or not to support the Western Pacific Railroad, an upgrade of the Big Trees Road, and a railroad line to Copperopolis. To the south, residents of the Big Oak Flat region had surveyed a route through northern Yosemite to Mono County and were also vying for San Joaquin County's endorsement.[5] Fortunately for the Sonora road proponents, San Joaquin County never gave serious consideration to the Yosemite route.

Since the Big Trees Road and the Sonora and Mono Road led to far separated destinations in Nevada and would, therefore, serve different markets,

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[1]Tuolumne Courier, 21 March 1863.

[2]Stockton Daily Independent, 12 February 1863.

[3]Ibid., 13 February 1863.

[4]Tuolumne Courier, 21 March 1863; Sonora Union Democrat, 21 February 1863.

[5]Stockton Daily Independent, 17 March 1863; Sonora Union Democrat, 10 January 1863.

many Stockton businessmen urged support for both routes.[6] Nevertheless, some Tuolumne County citizens were concerned that Stockton businessmen who had a financial interest in the Big Tree Road would oppose the Sonora route.[7]

As a result of their concerns, road supporters from Tuolumne and other counties launched a campaign to encourage San Joaquin and Stanislaus County voters to approve the bond issues for the Sonora and Mono Road. Even before the legislation had been introduced in Sacramento, Tuolumne County supervisors delegated Charles H. Randall and William S. Cooper to meet with San Joaquin County supervisors in April tc enlist their support for the project.[8] Apparently their efforts were successful for San Joaquin County representatives helped to draft the legislation that would authorize the issuance of bonds.[9] Then in April about 180 businessmen from Columbia sent a petition to the valley counties urging residents there to support the road.[10] Numerous articles which were directed toward San Joaquin Valley voters appeared in

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[6]Stockton Daily Independent, 13 February 1863.

[7]Sonora Union Democrat, 18 April 1863.

[8]Stockton Daily Independent, 7 February 1863.

[9]California Assembly Journal, Fourteenth Session, 1863 (Sacramento: State Printer, 1863), 365. SB 215 was introduced Feb. 21 passed the Assembly on March 20 and the Senate on March 23, 1863. See pp. 249, 365, 427.

[10]Tuolumne Courier, 18 April 1863.

Tuolumne County newspapers.[11] Other citizens wrote letters to the Stockton newspapers.[12]

As the May 12 election day neared, Tuolumne County road promoters became even more concerned than before that San Joaquin County might turn down the proposal. The Union Democrat urged that local meetings be called to raise funds to engage speakers to canvass San Joaquin County.[13] The idea was quickly taken up, and William S. Cooper and C. E. H. Wheaton were selected to make the circuit.[14] They were joined by Mono County's Timothy N. Machin and speakers from San Joaquin County.[15] The promotional tour carried them throughout the county.

Battling against increased costs, competition from other routes, and apathetic voters, supporters of the Sonora and Mono Road sought added inducements to encourage residents of the entire southern mining region to support the project. Although many of their arguments were well-founded, others were the result of over enthusiasm for the project. Conveniently, road promoters had only to look north to the Placerville Road to find their most convincing argument. The Sacramento-Placerville-Virginia City route appeared to be almost an exact parallel to the proposed road that would link Stockton, Sonora, and Aurora. Supporters of the Sonora route asserted that the

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[11]See Sonora Union Democrat, 11 April 1863; American Flag, 19 March 1863.

[12]Tuolumne Courier, 9 May 1863.

[13]Sonora Union Democrat, 18 April 1863

[14]Ibid., 9 May 1863.

[15]Stockton Daily Independent, 6 May 1863.

prosperity created by the Placerville Road could easily be duplicated by the Sonora and Mono Road.

The Placerville Road, which followed a course similar to today's Highway 50, had just completed its most successful year. As the main route between Nevada and California, it had captured a majority of the trans-Sierra trade. Because of an unusually mild winter, traffic had been able to flow over the road throughout the season.[16] An eight-week long survey on the Placerville Road revealed that an average of seventy-four teams traveled east on the road each day carrying a mean load of just over two tons per wagon, while, in turn, eighty wagons a day were headed west. In addition, each day an average of thirty-seven persons used the road by stagecoach and another twenty-three traveled by other means.[17] Most impressive, though, were the figures regarding tolls. According to an article published in Stockton's Daily San Joaquin Republican, the Placerville Road produced $1,098,150 in tolls in a single year.[18] The prospect of collecting similar fortunes on the Sonora and Mono Road went a long way to assuage concerns about the projected $150,000 price tag quoted by Cooper and Wallace. With tolls comparable to Placerville's, the entire cost of the new road could have been offset within two months.

Not only were tolls expected to provide substantial income, but the flow of trade was expected to revitalize towns in the southern mining region the way it had sparked a boom in Placerville. Observers noted that because of the trade,

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[16]Tuolumne Courier, 28 February 1863.

[17]Sacramento Union, 2 December 1862.

[18]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 5 November 1862.

"Placerville is the most busy and thriving town in the interior of the state."[19] Sonora's American Flag noted that the northern road had "increased Placerville from a little gone-out village to a prosperous city of five thousand people."[20] Implicit in the observations of Placerville's success were notes of regional jealousy that had persisted for years. A Stockton newspaper reported that it was apparently the only significant town in California that was not opening a road.[21]

Assertions that the Sonora and Mono Road could be as successful as the Placerville Road were predicated on the assumption that the Mono and Esmeralda mining regions would prove to be as productive as Washoe County had. The rush and rumble suggested that it would be. Discovered in 1860, by the summer of 1861 Aurora's population had reached nearly 2,000.[22] A year later it had doubled. At the same time Mono County's population had reported reached 8.000.[23] By the summer of 1863 Aurora had reached 5,000.[24] The only road to Aurora at the time was a circuitous route south from Virginia City. Still, in the spring of 1863 three stages a day traveled between the two mining

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[19]Tuolumne Courier, 18 April 1863.

[20]American Flag, 2 April 1863.

[21]Stockton Daily Independent, 16 March 1863. They noted that Marysville, Auburn, Nevada, and Orville were all in the process of developing roads across the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

[22]Journal of Council of the First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nevada (San Francisco: Valentine and Co., 1862), 213.

[23]Stockton Daily Independent, 7 May 1862.

[24]Earl W. Kersten, "The Early Settlement of Aurora, Nevada, and Nearby Mining Camps," Annals of the Association of American Geographers 54 (December 1964): 497.

towns.[25] The early strikes in Aurora had been so rich that speculation soared, prompting a Stockton newspaper to predict that Esmeralda "may become the wealthiest spot on earth."[26] The Tuolumne Courier anticipated that "thousands and tens of thousands of men will travel every route to this El Dorado."[27] Once the road was opened and the needed machinery could be shipped to the remote Nevada mines, the area was expected to become as prosperous as Virginia City.[28] With additional strikes occurring nearly every month in surrounding regions, road supporters had substantial reason for believing that the Esmeralda region would support years of commerce over the new road.

Merchants, farmers, and freight men were anxious to see the road open, for they anticipated handsome profits from trade with the Esmeralda region. For those who could deliver goods to Aurora, the high prices there guaranteed substantial profits. In 1862, flour that sold for six dollars a barrel in San Francisco would bring from twenty-five to thirty dollars in Aurora.[29] Lumber sold for ninety dollars per 1,000 board feet in Aurora in 1863.[30] With pack trains carrying freight across the mountains for as little as 4.5 cents a pound, businessmen could see the potential for huge profits if freight could travel year

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[25]Stockton Daily Independent, 21 April 1863.

[26]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 25 July 1861.

[27]Tuolumne Courier, 26 October 1861.

[28]Stockton Daily Independent, 12 February 1863.

[29]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 15 May 1863.

[30]Tuolumne Courier, 4 April 1863.

round by road.[31] The new mining region was depicted as being in great need of supplies due to the "natural sterility of their soil and the new condition of their country."[32] California merchants anticipated supplying virtually all of Nevada's needs for many years to come.[33]

Besides convincing people of the need for a wagon road to Esmeralda, advocates of the Sonora and Mono Road had to persuade them that the Sonora route was the best choice. Foremost among their arguments was that the proposed route was the most direct from Stockton to Aurora. From Placerville to Aurora was 225 miles while from Sonora it was only 125 miles.[34] Once established, the road would capture all of the trade to Mono, Esmeralda, and neighboring regions. While the Sonora and Mono Road would be the shortest route to Aurora, other claims about the route were less accurate.

Road promoters repeatedly claimed in 1863 that the route could be used throughout the winter.[35] This optimistic forecast was based on the mild winter of 1862-63. One mountain traveler encountered up to five feet of snow on the summit in April, but other reports from earlier in the winter insisted that the snow had not exceeded two and one half feet at any point.[36] Some indicated that the

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[31]American Flag, 4 June 1863.

[32]Tuolumne Courier, 14 February 1863.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Alta California, 13 July 1866. Cooper and Wallace had mistakenly calculated the distance at 114 miles. See Sonora Union Democrat, 21 February 1863.

[35]Stockton Daily Independent, 12 February 1863.

[36]Tuolumne Courier, 9 May 1863; Sonora Union Democrat, 21 February 1863.

mountain route would be easier to keep open in the winter than roads in upstate New York.[37] Road promoters must have hoped that voters had short memories. Only the year before, the road commissioners had been turned away by too much snow in July. Thirty-eight years of snow depth records in the twentieth century indicate the snow averages 61.4 inches deep on Sonora Pass in February, while sometimes reaching depths in excess of ten feet.[38]

Another claim that road supporters made was that the route followed an easy grade and crossed over a low pass. While Cooper and Wallace had measured the new pass at 8,400 feet, others lowered the figure by more than two thousand feet in their descriptions of the route.[39] In fact, the proposed road would cross Sonora Pass at 9,643 feet and Saint Mary's Pass at 10,040 feet, the highest wagon road passes in California.[40] Nevertheless, road promoters claimed that the road's gentle grades could accommodate "the heaviest loaded teams coming out of Stockton," and that when the road was completed "travelers will hardly think they are crossing the mountains."[41]

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[37]Tuolumne Courier, 9 May 1863.

[38]Snow Survey Measurements, Bulletin No. 129-70, (Sacramento: California Department of Water Resources, 1971), 352. Measurements taken at an elevation of 8800 feet. Highway 108 over Sonora Pass has never been kept open during the winter.

[39]Stockton Daily Independent, 7 May 1863. Although some measurements of the height of the pass were based on its elevation above Sonora, Cooper and Wallace's report clearly states "eight thousand four hundred feet above the level of the sea." See Sonora Union Democrat, 25 October 1862.

[40]"Sonora Pass, Calif.," United States Geological Survey Topographical Map, 7.5 Minute Series, 1979.

[41]Tuolumne Courier, 9 May 1863. Later road crews were perhaps surprised when they learned from William Brewer of California Geologic Survey team on July 22, 1863, that they had calculated the summit to be 10,300 feet. See William Brewer, Up and Down California, 423, 425.

Believing that good roads already existed over a major portion of the route, road promoters declared that only about forty-five miles of road had to be built and that it required little blasting and excavation.[42] Actually Cooper and Wallace had given the impression that only fifty-four miles of road needed to be constructed from Strawberry Flat to the Hot Springs.[43] Some portions would require substantial blasting and excavation.

Besides promoting the road as beneficial to trade and following an easy route, road promoters claimed that its construction would bring widespread benefits to the region through settlement of land along the route and increases in tax revenues and property values. The Stockton Daily Independent forecast that the various road projects would raise income from their county tax rolls by 20 percent in two years. In ten years, they estimated that the tax rolls would quadruple and that land which once sold for ten dollars an acre would bring fifty. Stockton's population and wealth were expected to multiply six times during the next decade.[44] The increase in tax income was anticipated to offset the higher taxes which would result from the road bonds.[45] In Tuolumne County the Tuolumne Courier predicted that the new road would raise property values there 25 percent in one year.[46] Sonora's Union Democrat stated that property

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[42]Tuolumne Courier, 9 May 1863.

[43]Sonora Union Democrat, 25 October 1862.

[44]Stockton Daily Independent, 12, 13 February 1863.

[45]Ibid., 28 April 1863.

[46]Tuolumne Courier, 30 May 1863.

along the route of the road would double in value.[47] Others insisted that completion of the road would certainly result in the overland mail route being switched to the new route.[48]

Perhaps the most misleading of the information being spread about the new road revolved around its cost. While Cooper and Wallace had clearly indicated in their report of 1862 that theirs had only been a preliminary survey and that the $150,000 figure was only an estimate, later accounts of their report circulated in both Stockton and Sonora described it as "a thorough survey" and indicated that the route had been "carefully mapped."[49] The $150,000 estimate was assumed by many to be the total amount required to connect Sonora and Aurora with a wagon road.

By the time voters went to the polls on May 12, 1863, they had been bombarded for five months with articles, letters, and speeches promoting the virtues and rewards of the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road. Not surprisingly both Stanislaus and San Joaquin Counties voted in favor of the road by a wide margin. San Joaquin voters cast their ballots in favor of the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road, the Big Trees Road, and the Western Pacific Railroad. Only the railroad to Copperopolis was turned down. The Mono Road won 1498 votes in its favor, while only 585 were cast in opposition. In Stockton the road was approved 1,119 to 14. It received seventy-three more votes than the Big Trees

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[47]Sonora Union Democrat, 11 April 1863.

[48]Stockton Daily Independent, 6 May 1863.

[49]Ibid., 12 February 1863; Sonora Union Democrat, 21 February 1863.

Road had. North county rural farming communities, though, such as Waterloo, Woodbridge, Linden, and Lockeford voted against the road.[50]

The Rush to Claim Properties along the Sonora and Mono Road

Once the project had been approved, prompt action was taken to get underway. Sonora citizens, unwilling to wait for bonds to be issued, contributed money immediately to send a crew of men into the mountains to make the route suitable for pack trains.[51] William G. Heslep, who had been promoting the road the year before, was designated as road commissioner from Tuolumne County. Stanislaus County chose Knigh's Ferry merchant James P. Allen, while San Joaquin County selected H. P. Handy, a civil engineer and surveyor.[52] Both the Democratic and Union Party newspapers in Sonora praised their selections as commissioners.[53] Mono County later picked Tryon Milton Yancey.[54] Although a resident of Mono County at that time, Yancey had previously worked for the Columbia Gazette and would later work for the Union Democrat and serve as Tuolumne County sheriff.[55]

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[50]Stockton Daily Independent, 13, 18 May 1863.

[51]Ibid., 30 May 1863.

[52]Tuolumne Courier, 23 May 1863.

[53]American Flag, 28 May 1863; Sonora Union Democrat, 23 May 1863.

[54]Sonora Union Democrat, 30 May 1863.

[55]Herbert Lang, A History of Tuolumne County Califiornia (San Francisco: B. F. Alley, 1882), 371-72.

Before work could be put up for bid, a detailed survey and specifications had to be completed. Cooper and Wallace were engaged to join the survey team under Handy's direction.[56] By early June they were in the mountains working on one of the most difficult portions of the road known as the River Hill section which extends from Niagara Creek to the Stanislaus River crossing at the Clark Fork junction.[57] The old trail had crossed directly over the top of the hill there and then descended sharply to the river. Handy and his team surveyed a new route along the steep slope of the Stanislaus River canyon. Once the section had been completed, it was put out for bid, while Allen and Heslep set out on their own to explore the country between there and the pass.[58]

The launching of the road project set off a wave of optimism about the future of trade to Esmeralda. With unrestrained enthusiasm the American Flag predicted that the road would be completed by the end of summer: "Just think of it fellow citizens! Within four months a daily line of stages between Sonora and Aurora, bringing Tuolumne within a day of the great silver region of Esmeralda, the richest silver mining district in the world !"[59] Pack trains began to use the route even before it was clear of snow, prompting the Union Democrat to note that "already the beneficial efforts of the measure are beginning to be felt in and

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[56]Other member of the survey team included Louis Lantz and George McQuade. Undoubtedly the series of articles which appeared in the Stockton Daily Independent describing the work of the survey party and signed "LL" were from Louis Lantz.

[57]The location was then known as Fletcher's crossing. See the Stockton Daily Independent, 23 June 1863.

[58]Stockton Daily Independent, 16 June 1863.

[59]American Flag, 28 May 1863.

around this city."[60] One mountain traveler reported that he passed fifty people in a single day headed up the route for Mono.[61] Freight and stage lines were set up to carry cargo and passengers as far as wagons could travel up the road and then convert to mules or horses.[62] Even Stockton businessmen noted an increase in business due to the opening of the pack trail.[63]

The passage of the bond issues by San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties and the prompt movement toward construction set off a surge of land claims along the proposed route. Settlement had begun along the first twenty miles of the road east of Sonora as early as 1851. As the demand for ice, water, and lumber increased so had the number of people claiming land along what was then called the Emigrant Road. Most of the claims were for ranches that were used for lumbering, orchards, and stock grazing. Scattered through the lower foothills were a number of quartz mines. The most remote outposts, other than water company facilities, were summer pasture lands at Cow Creek, a homestead at Strawberry, and a claim at Niagara Creek.[64]

In June 1863, entrepreneurs preempted key locations along the route of the road. Fourteen miles east of Sonora where the roads from Columbia and Sonora converged on the ridge, Thomas Josiah Northrup claimed a quarter

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[60]Sonora Union Democrat, 23 May 1863.

[61]Ibid., 6 June 1863. Many were herdsmen driving cattle, hogs or sheep.

[62]Ibid., 30 May, 20 June 1863.

[63]Stockton Daily Independent, 9 June 1863.

[64]Tuolumne County Homesteads, vol. 1, p. 218. William A. and Jemina Boyce claimed the Strawberry Flat ranch of 480 acres on 4 November 1861. The ranch had been occupied as early as 1853, but apparently had been abandoned.

section of land and built his Excelsior Hotel.[65] A short distance up the road Richard Hessian and a partner named Harper opened a store.[66] At Strawberry a number of people had previously staked out sections of land, but by 1863 Augustus D. Lascelle had gained title to the key properties that fronted the Mono Road where it crossed the Stanislaus River.[67]

Further up the road at Niagara Creek, Daniel Longeway and A. W. Hulse filed claims which included the broad flats where the road crossed the creek.[68] At Fletcher's Crossing, where the proposed route bridged the Middle Fork of the Stanislaus, expressman Frederick A. Brightman claimed 160 acres which straddled the river.[69]

Tuolumne County assessor David Hays, guided by the surveys and maps for the road, filed a claim on June 12, 1863, on a ranch at a place he called Onion Valley on the Clark Fork, about fifty-five miles east of Sonora.[70] At the same time Hays was filing his claim, though, road commissioners Allen and Heslep were out exploring the upper region of the road. On June 14, they returned to the surveyor's camp at Cascade Creek to report that they had located a new route for the road, following the main fork of the Stanislaus River

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[65]Tuolumne County Claims, vol. 8, (23 June 1863), p. 311.

[66]Sonora Union Democrat, 25 July 1863,

[67]Tuolumne County Deeds, vol. 8, p. 284; vol. 11, pp. 118, 479.

[68]Tuolumne County Claims, vol. 8, pp. 306, 309.

[69]Ibid., 305.

[70]Ibid., 307.

rather than the Clark Fork.[71] Hays' property had been bypassed. Although officially the new route had to be reviewed by the rest of the commissioners and surveyed, there seemed to be little doubt that it would be adopted.

Five days later, Sonora attorney John N. Stone recorded a claim for a parcel of land fifty-six miles east of Sonora "at or near a place known as Eureka Pass" on the main Stanislaus River "about seven miles above the junction of Clark's Fork."[72] The speed with which he had made the claim suggested that he had been advised by someone on the survey team of the change in routes. Then, in a move that would later generate a storm of protest, three of the road commissioners purchased key claims along the road route. On June 18, a day before Stone's claim was even recorded, he sold it to Heslep, Allen, and Handy for $100.[73] On the same day the three commissioners purchased Longeway's land at Niagara Creek for $100.[74] Allen further recorded a claim to a piece of land sixty miles east of Sonora on the main river.[75] On the same day Wallace recorded a parcel next to Allen's.[76] Within another few months Yancey had joined them with a neighboring claim.[77] At Strawberry, Allen and his business partner from Knights Ferry, Henry Palmer, bought half interest in Lascelle's vast

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[71]Stockton Daily Independent, 23 June 1863.

[72]Tuolumne County Claims, vol 8, p. 309.

[73]Ibid., vol. 11, p. 653.

74Ibid., 654.

[75]Tuolumne County Claims, vol. 8, p. 319.

[76]Ibid.

[77]ibid., 323.

holdings.[78] Within a year Palmer and Allen had purchased full title to the properties.[79]

Although nothing in the statutes prevented the road commissioners from using their position to have first opportunity at claiming and purchasing key properties along the road route, the acquisitions would become a major issue later when opposition to the way the road project was being managed reached its peak.[80]

David Hays, whose property had been left stranded on the Clark Fork by the commissioners' sudden adjustment of the route, simply moved his belongings to Eureka Valley, one of the choicest parcels of land along the main fork of the Stanislaus. Apparently in defiance of the commissioners' previous claims to it, Hays and his colleague John J. Welch, set up a hostelry there that would remain for years as an important stopping place along the Mono Road.[81] The road commissioners, perhaps fearing repercussions, took no measures to reclaim their property. Later accounts suggested that Hays and Welch had been there first.[82] Seven other claims were made in 1863 along the new

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[78]Tuolumne County Deeds, vol. 11, p. 737. The property would become known as the 320 acre "Strawberry Flat Ranch," encompassing both old Strawberry Flat adjacent to the Strawberry Reservoir, today known as Pinecrest, and the area where the road crossed the river, today known as Strawberry.

[79]Ibid., vol. 13, pp. 273, 524.

[80]American Flag, 24 December 1863.

[81]Hays finally filed a legal claim on the property on 19 November 1869. See Tuolumne County Claims, vol. 8, p. 507.

[82]American Flag, 24 December 1863.

section of road on the main fork of the Stanislaus, one even in the summit valley at nine thousand feet in elevation only a half mile from Sonora Pass.[83]

Across the summit in Mono County, a smaller scale land rush was occurring along the proposed route of the Mono Road. Z. B. Tinkhum, who had served as road commissioner from Mono County the previous year, and a number of associates filed claim in May, 1863, to what today is known as Pickel Meadow.[84] A week later Hiram Leavitt recorded his claim on a broad meadow that would soon bear his name.[85] Leavitt began in 1863 with a small cabin to offer meals to the packers who were already using the route.[86] A week after Leavitt filed his claim, he was joined by I. P. Yaney and B. W. Harwood.[87] Yaney and the Heslep brothers had been in partnership in several Tuolumne enterprises, and the business relationship may have extended to the Mono County claim as well.[88] The location of these properties was significant, for critics of the road would soon charge that the road had purposely been diverted from a more natural route to pass through these ranches.[89]

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[83]Tuolumne County Claims, vol. 8, pp. 312- 16, 320.

[84]Mono County Claims, book A, p. 213. Other members of the group were William VanHorn, Byron. B. Bird, P. Munson, and Jesse McGath. See also Mono County Claims , book A, pp. 352-52.

[85]Ibid., 227.

[86]American Flag, 29 October 1863.

[87]Mono County Claims, book A, pp. 228, 229.

[88]See Tuolumne County Deeds, Vol. 2, pp. 185, 353. Yaney's oldest son was named Bertine Heslep Yaney. See Mono County Great Register, 1879.

[89]American Flag, 24 October 1863.

Construction of the Road

The major contracts for the construction of the Sonora and Mono Road were awarded to John Danforth Patterson. He had been involved with the growth of Tuolumne County nearly from its beginning.[90] In 1851, he had worked briefly as secretary for the Tuolumne County Water Company and then later served as a construction foreman for its rival, the Columbia and Stanislaus River Water Company.[91] He had won popular support for the office of sheriff in 1859. By 1861, his popularity had sagged somewhat, although he won re-election with a plurality.[92]

Patterson decided not to run for a third term in 1863 and turned his attention to road construction. The commissioners had decided to let the most difficult section of the road, the River Hill division, out for bid first. Although its 3.6 miles was the shortest section of the road, Patterson's low bid of $37,000 in bonds made it the most expensive. The average cost for the complete road was estimated by Handy at $2,190 per mile, while the River Hill portion averaged $10,472 per mile.[93] Working out of a base camp at Niagara Creek, Patterson's 110 man crew blasted a path along the granite cliffs and built up high rock

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[90]John Danforth Patterson is listed in the 1850 census for Tuolumne County as "John Danfoth." In 1852 Patterson was also co-owner of a saloon on Main Street in Columbia. See Tuolumne County Deeds, vol. A1, pp. 114, 117.

[91]Daily San Joaquin Republican, 2 July 1851; Columbia Clipper, 20 March 1855.

[92]Carlo M. DeFerrari, "The Twenty Sheriffs of Old Tuolumne," Quarterly of the Tuolumne County Historical Society 8 (January-March, 1969): 275-77.

[93]Stockton Daily Independent, 12 November 1863.

embankments to support the narrow roadbed.[94] That portion of the road later became known as the Patterson Grade.

By July the commissioners were advertising for bids for the next section of road, 21.5 miles from Bald Mountain to Niagara Creek, a portion known as the South Fork division. No one at the time raised any objections that the road commissioners were including a five mile stretch of road from Bald Mountain to Strawberry which had not been a part of the $150,000 estimate. When the bids were received, the commissioners were forced to disregard the lowest bid because the contractor had failed to provide the "guarantee required by law."[95] According to the road statute, all bids had to be accompanied by "a written undertaking in double the amount of the contract price, guaranteed by two or more responsible sureties. . . ."[96] The next lowest bid was from William Condon for $41,500 in cash. If the counties could have sold the bonds for at least eighty-five cents on the dollar, as they were required to under the rules of the statute, Condon's would have been the best offer.[97] Stating that they needed to check with the various counties, the commissioners delayed awarding the contract until August 5.[98] Eventually, though, since the counties lacked cash and were having difficulty selling the bonds, the commissioners accepted

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[94]Ibid., 21 July 1863.

[95]Stockton Daily Independent, 1 August 1863.

[96]Statues of California, Fourteenth Session, Chapter CXVI, Section 8.

[97]Ibid, Section 11.

[98]Stockton Daily Independent, 1 August 1863. The August 5 date would later become important because it meant that work crews hired from outside the county would not meet the thirty day residency requirement to vote legally at the September 2 election.

Patterson's bid of $48,400 in bonds at 35.25 cents on the dollar.[99] Patterson put a crew of three hundred to work on the lengthy section.[100]

By September, as Patterson's men were nearing completion of the South fork division, reports from the road commissioners published in the Stockton Daily Independent revealed for the first time that the $150,000 in bonds would not be sufficient to complete the road. The bonds had only produced about $130,000 in cash. For that amount, 26.3 miles had been completed on the western side of the mountains and 16 miles of easy terrain on the eastern side. A 24 mile toll road already existed from Aurora to Bridgeport and the road from Sonora to Bald Mountain was well established. That left a gap of 37.9 difficult miles over the summit yet to be completed.[101]

Handy's figures, published later, indicated that $117,332 would be needed to complete the remaining 37.8 miles. Another $40,503 would also be required to upgrade the Sonora end of the road and to purchase or bypass the Aurora toll road.[102] In all an additional $158,000 would be needed to complete the entire 130 mile route from Sonora to Aurora.

While San Joaquin County staggered under the news, questioning what had gone wrong and debating how they would proceed, Tuolumne County was embroiled in election scandals and political disputes that cast a different light on the Sonora and Mono Road project.

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[99]Ibid.

[100]Ibid., 9 September 1863.

[101]Stockton Daily Independent, 9 September 1863.

[102]Ibid., 12 November 1863.

CHAPTER 6

POLITICAL ACRIMONY AND THE SONORA AND MONO WAGON ROAD

The September 2, 1863, election in Tuolumne County was expected to be a decisive confrontation between Unionists and Democrats, but it did more to escalate hostilities than to settle differences. The intensity and bitterness of the campaign and the far reaching implications of its outcome caused political belligerence to spill over its normal boundaries and permeate nearly every aspect of life in Tuolumne County. Prentice Mulford observed,

> men from either section regard each other coldly; an invisible line of separation has been drawn; there are knots and cliques; there are Union and Secsh saloons; the Flag becomes a heated symbol with some; a covering for intolerance, fanaticism and blind prejudice with others. . .[1]

The Sonora and Mono Road, which prior to then had managed to avoid the main torrent of conflict, suddenly found itself awash in the turmoil of political dissonance.

Political Conditions in Tuolumne County

The deep-rooted strife between Democrats and Republicans (Unionists) in Tuolumne County was fueled not only by the national issues arising from the Civil War, but also by unique local circumstances that further intensified the

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[1]Sonora Union Democrat, 7 May 1870.

animosity between the two camps. Prior to 1861 the Democrats had been so dominant in Tuolumne, that the county had been called "the South Carolina of the State."[2] While only about 10 percent of the registered voters in Tuolumne County were born in states which had seceded from the Union, many northern and foreign born citizens supported Democratic candidates.[3]

In the 1860 presidential elections, Tuolumne County demonstrated its allegiance to the southern Democrats by favoring Breckinridge with 38 percent of the vote. Lincoln received 33 percent and Douglas 29 percent . Sonora and Big Oak Flat had given Breckinridge nearly 50 percent of their votes, while Columbia had favored Lincoln. In California as a whole, Breckinridge had been third with 31 percent of the votes.[4] In the same election, Tuolumne voters also supported several other prominent Democrats for key local offices.[5]

In the 1861 elections Tuolumne County supported the Republican candidate Leland Stanford for governor with 44 percent of the vote, the same percentage that Stanford earned statewide. Local Tuolumne County elections, however, did not follow the gubernatorial pattern. A Union Democrat won a seat in the state assembly, Patterson was re-elected sheriff, and the prominent

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[2]The Bay of San Francisco, the metropolis of the Pacific coast and its suburban cities: A History (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1892), 458.

[3]A 10 percent sample of the Great Register for Tuolumne County, 1866-67 indicated that 44 percent of the registered voters were born in northern states, 10 percent from southern states, and 5 percent from boarder states. Another 40 percent were naturalized citizens. Among them, the largest groups were the Irish with 12 percent; German, 10; English, 5; Scandinavian, 4; and Italian, 3.

[4]Columbia Times, 8 November 1860. Percents were based on the votes cast for the top three candidates.

[5]Lang, History of Tuolumne County, 306.

Democrat, Charles H. Randall, was selected to the county board of supervisors.[6] With the reshuffling of allegiances caused by the divided Democrats and the Civil War, no party dominated county politics.

By 1862, several other factors had begun to influence the complexion of Tuolumne County's electorate. The mineral strikes in Mono County and Nevada were drawing substantial numbers of residents across the mountains. Elections overwhelmingly favoring Union candidates in Mono County suggest that a larger number of Union men left Tuolumne than Democrats.[7] Of greater significance than the exodus of miners, though, was the recruiting of men to serve in various Union Army volunteer companies. Nearly three hundred men, almost all supporters of the Union Party, enlisted and were stationed outside the county.[8] On April 25, 1863, the state legislature passed an act that would permit the soldiers' absentee votes to be counted in their home counties.[9] By 1862, as a result of these changes in numbers of voters and political affiliations, Tuolumne County was almost evenly divided between Unionists and Democrats. This precarious balance of power encouraged bitter political confrontations which further polarized the two camps, intensified the conflict, and at times led to open hostility. It furthermore resulted in close contests which were unusually vulnerable to election tampering.

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[6]Tuolumne Courier, 12 September 1861.

[7]Ibid., 5 September 1863.

[8]Lang, History of Tuolumne County, 230-32.

[9]The State Supreme Court lated ruled that the act was unconstitutional and thereby negated the soldiers' votes.

Daniel O. McCarthy and the American Flag

Tensions between the two political camps were further exacerbated in 1862 by the appearance in Sonora of the American Flag, a Union newspaper. Editor Daniel O. McCarthy considered all Democrats despicable traitors and devoted his publication to an untrammeled assault on their politics and their character. The Democrat's position in Sonora was represented by the long established Union Democrat, edited by Robert Ferral. Although usually more restrained than the Flag, the Democrat kept it no secret that it considered McCarthy's paper a "dirty, sectional abolition sheet, which is a disgrace to the country and the honored name it bears. . . ."[10]

Issues of the Flag abounded with inflammatory articles attacking Democrats by name. Typical of the grade of articles published in the Flag was a contribution which described the Union Democrat's agent as "a splendid specimen of a Democrat, and of course, opposed to "negro equality," [who] has been living with Wally squaws for years past and is the father of more half breeds than any man in the county."[11] While McCarthy's publication undoubtedly enraged local Democrats, his actions in December 1862 demonstrated that he was not just a man of words. When the editor learned that an old enemy was making derogatory and threatening statements about him, McCarthy marched into a local saloon and shot the unarmed man three times, killing him. Then equipped with a double barrel shotgun and a pistol, he held

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[10]Sonora Union Democrat, 29 September 1862.

[11]American Flag, 27 November 1862.

off an angry mob until law officers arrived.[12] Despite the repeated efforts of the Democratic county officials, the grand jury failed to indict McCarthy.[13] Perhaps believing that he could publish whatever he pleased with impunity, McCarthy's editorials grew even more inflammatory in 1863.

His first assault on the management of the Sonora and Mono Road project was directed at Charles H. Randall, the Democratic supervisor. An article in 1862 in the American Flag charged that Randall and his political allies had jeopardized the opportunity to gain San Joaquin County's support for the road:

> The businessmen of Stockton. . . are too shrewd to risk their capital in any undertaking got up by a set of men notorious for their rascality and presided over by men wholly incompetent to carry such operations to a successful issue. Had the right men been in the right place in this matter, the road to Mono would ere this been two-thirds completed.[14]

During the next year Randall would become a key target of the Unionists. Born in Rhode Island, he had been living in Tuolumne County since 1851. He had served as sheriff and deputy marshall during the 1850s. By 1860, he was operating a grocery store in Sonora in partnership with James Lane. Elected as county supervisor in 1861, he drew popular support throughout the war, remaining in office for six years.[15] Although only one of three supervisors, Randall was often accused of dominating the board. The Tuolumne Courier, a

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[12]Sonora Union Democrat, 27 December 1862; Tuolumne Courier, 27 December 1862.

[13]The Bay of San Francisco, 459.

[14]American Flag, 12 February 1863.

[15]Lang, History of Tuolumne County, 418-19. Randall later served as county judge and as editor of the Sonora Union Democrat.

Union newspaper, described the Board of Supervisors as being composed of "one sharp, keen Copperhead [Randall], and two professed Union men who are not sharp. . . . "[16]

McCarthy's criticism was evidently aimed at Randall's selection of his business partner, James Lane, as supervisor of the road in 1862, although he may also have been indicting the two road commissioners, Browne and Clark. Nevertheless, when San Joaquin County voted overwhelmingly to support the road, the charge was quickly forgotten. Later the supervisors selected Heslep, a Unionist, as a road commissioner from Tuolumne County, and the Flag complimented their action.[17]

Another prominent Democrat associated with the road who drew the wrath of the American Flag was Sheriff John Danforth Patterson. Unionists depicted him as a bully who would misuse the power of his office for political ends. At a Democratic rally in Columbia in 1862 a writer for the American Flag recorded that "Dan Patterson was in the crowd, surrounded by an armed band of ruffians ready to cut down or shoot any loyal man that 'Bobby' [Robert Ferral, editor of the Union Democrat] could exasperate enough to notice him. . . . "[18]

When Patterson was awarded the second contract for the Sonora and Mono Road, the American Flag charged that the commissioners had wasted $13,000 by accepting Patterson's bid, "and worse than all, for the benefit of a notorious traitor. . . . The matter looks like making rather free with flush funds,

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[16]Tuolumne Courier, 16 April 1864.

[17]American Flag, 28 May 1863.

[18]Ibid., 27 November 1862.

and smells of secesh."[19] The Flag suggested that the commissioners should have rejected all bids and re-advertised, but to do so would have caused delays that would have cost the taxpayers more than a few thousand dollars. These jabs at Randall and Patterson presaged Union criticism of the management of the road project that would come in the fall.

The Election Scandals of 1863

During the summer months interest focused on the upcoming election. The Union newspapers, in particular, viewed the defeat of Democrats at the ballot box as important to the war effort as victories on the battlefield.[20] With the inclusion of the soldier vote, Unionists were confident that they could win critical local offices and wrest control of the county from the Democrats. In unrestrained language, the American Flag in the weeks before the election described the local Democrats as men with "under-jaws as large as bacon-hams, and brows with all the intellectual development of a nigger-maul."[21]

Whether intimidated by McCarthy's violent actions or disgusted by his yellow journalism, the Union Democrat avoided being drawn into an exchange of personal insults with the Flag. Instead the Democrat stressed national

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[19]Ibid., 13 August 1863.

[20]Tuolumne Courier, 20 October 1863.

[21]American Flag, 20 August 1863.

issues, blaming the Civil War on "the aggressions of a fanatical party in the North upon the institution of slavery. . . . "[22]

On September 2, election day, voting in the large towns proceeded in an orderly manner, but up in the mountains along the course of the Sonora and Mono Road, a rash of incidents of alleged voting fraud quickly focused attention on Patterson. According to the American Flag, Patterson had stealthily populated his work camps with laborers from outside the county and secured their support for the Democratic ticket with liquor or other inducements.[23] According to California law, citizens had to be residents of a county for thirty days before they could vote. Patterson's major contract had been awarded less than thirty days before the election, which prompted many to believe that the workers he had imported from other counties were not qualified voters.

Reports of irregularities and abuses set off an explosion of protest. When nineteen of Patterson's non-resident workmen were turned away from the ballot box at Cow Creek, they were transported down the road to Strawberry Flat where less diligent voting officials accepted their ballots.[24] In a sworn affidavit, Charles Rothstein, a non-resident, stated that at Strawberry Flat a man put a Democratic ticket into his hands, dragged him to the polls, "snatched the ticket

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[22]Sonora Union Democrat, 29 August 1863.

[23]American Flag, 27 August 1863.

[24]Ibid., 10 September 1863. The election officials at Cow Creek were James Lane (a Democrat), William Fletcher and C. H. Cofran. At Strawberry Flat they were Seth G. Sneden (a Unionist), A. Lascelle, and John Boyd. Sneden was an early editor of the American Flag. See American Flag, 20 August 1863.

out of [his] hands, and . . . then put said ticket into the box, against the will and consent of said affiant."[25]

From further up the road at Mill Creek came reports that "traitors" had attempted to move the polls to one of Patterson's construction camps. When that failed, Democratic hecklers stationed themselves at the polling location to intimidate Union voters. "When a Union man voted they called him a son of a bitch, and reviled him in every possible manner."[26] Others were assaulted, and one man reportedly "tore down and stamped on the American flag."[27]

The most serious case of voting irregularities occurred at Phoenix Lake. According to one account, only six voters lived in the precinct, but on election day thirty-nine appeared to cast their ballots.[28] Another witness claimed that when the election judge challenged the votes of "a number of unnaturalized aliens," Dennis Fahey, a local resident, had threatened to "'cave in his head.'"[29] Then at the end of the voting day both the original and duplicate returns mysteriously vanished. The precinct judges made another list of the returns and attempted to submit it to the County Clerk, but he rejected the returns as invalid.[30] A further election scandal arose when the Democratic candidate for

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[25]American Flag, 24 September 1863.

[26]Ibid., 1 October 1863.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Tuolumne Courier, 5 September 1863.

[29]American Flag, 10 September 1863. The election inspector was A. H. Hyde. The judges were Thomas Simmons and S. A. Reed.

[30]Bourland v. Hildreth, Reports of Cases Determined in the Supreme Court of the State of California, vol. XXVI (San Francisco: Sumner Whitney, A. L. Bancroft, 1875), 163.

sheriff and the Deputy County Clerk were caught in the court house at midnight, allegedly tampering with the votes.[31]

Excluding the soldier vote, the Democratic candidates, for the most part, won by slim margins. Two hundred Union soldier votes would have reversed virtually the entire election, but after lengthy battles in court the state Supreme Court in 1864 declared the legislation granting the soldiers the right to vote to be unconstitutional.[32] At the time, though, Union Party members were convinced that the inclusion of the soldier vote had given them the election. Had the Unionists known that they had lost the election, the aftermath might have been a violent confrontation between the two camps. As it was, the Union newspapers were so enraged by the conduct of the Democrats that they struck out at them and their accomplices with fierce hostility.

From the outset, the attack was heavily racial. Unionists were angered that so many naturalized citizens had elected to support the Democratic cause. In Columbia, the American Flag claimed that of 169 Democratic voters, only three had been born in the United States. In particular the newspaper lashed out at the Irish, French, and Italians.[33] Loyal Union men were urged to ostracize the Democrats. "Don't deal with them; don't employ them; don't trust them in any shape; don't let them sleep under your roof. . . ."[34] A contributor to the

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[31]Tuolumne Courier, 19 September 1863.

[32]Bourland v. Hildreth

[33]American Flag, 10 September 1863.

[34]Ibid.

Tuolumne Courier threatened "to stop the perjured villains from voting at the Judicial Election, in old Columbia, if it takes pick handles to do it."[35]

The Unionists complained about election workers, judges, Supervisor Randall, and Union Party traitors, but the main target of their attack was Patterson. Charges that he had stacked his camps with Democratic voters were undoubtedly true. Strawberry Flat, Cow Creek, Mill Creek, Danville, and Phoenix Reservoir totaled 398 Democratic votes or about 11 percent of the total vote of the county.[36] Unionists charged that as soon as the election was over, Patterson dismissed his crews and they returned to their counties of residence. A month later when judicial elections were held, the Democratic vote dropped by 452 and the Union Party celebrated a decisive victory.[37]

McCarthy zeroed his American Flag cannons in on Patterson and opened fire, depicting Patterson's workers as "vagabonds from Calaveras,. . . Kanakas, Greasers and even negroes."[38] He went on to describe the voters herded to the polls by Patterson as "delegations from the lazarettos of Italy, the bogs of Ireland, and the leper hospitals of Mexico, together with a seasoning of bushwackers from Oceanica, and hog-thieves from Arkansas."[39] The Tuolumne Courier , more restrained than the Flag, labelled Patterson's men "lazy, loafing foreign scum."[40]

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[35]Tuolumne Courier, 19 September 1863.

[36]American Flag, 21 October 1863.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., 10 September 1863.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Tuolumne Courier, 26 September 1863.

Criticism of Road Management

Inevitably the political furor over Patterson's actions spilled over into the entire Sonora and Mono Road project. With Patterson, in the minds of many, a proven traitor and criminal, it followed that those who had granted him the road contracts must also be traitors. The financial condition of the road was almost indisputable evidence to the Union camp that political corruption had undermined the project. Of the four road commissioners, Handy and Heslep were regarded as loyal Union men, while Lane and Yancey were cast in the Democratic camp. The two surveyors had faced each other in the election for the county surveyor post, Wallace as a Democrat and Cooper as a Unionist, although neither were particularly active politically.[41]

According to the contract, Patterson was supposed to have completed his sections of the road by October 10. Apparently several minor portions were not completed. The American Flag charged that as a result, Patterson should forfeit bonds and contracts:

> Patterson neglected his business to electioneer for enemies of the Government, insomuch that we understand he is completely swamped and will probably lose several thousand dollars on the contract, having employed three times as many men as were necessary, or as could be worked to advantage. It is well understood that he took the contract for the sole purpose of colonizing copperhead voters.[42]

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[41] Although records indicate that Wallace won the election, other records show Cooper as the county surveyor from 1862-68. Wallace may not have contested the election when the soldier vote was included as many other Democrats did. See American Flag, 24 September 1863 and Lang, History of Tuolumne County, 306-09.

[42] American Flag, 8 October 1863.

The commissioners, though, had included an "exceptional weather" clause in Patterson's contract and were willing to allow him to finish the next spring.[43] This brought even the Union members of the road commission under suspicion.

In late October the American Flag published an article which attacked the route of the Sonora and Mono Road as being designed to benefit a few land holders in Mono County at the expense of the general public. Apparently basing his criticism on the opinions of an informant, the writer, who used the sobriquet "Mono," argued that the road zigzagged down a heavy grade that could have been avoided, and then crossed the Walker River three times when only one bridge was needed. Political corruption was obviously the source of the problem, "Mono" concluded:

> A number of secessionists and copperheads, not satisfied with endeavoring to destroy the Government, and ever on the alert to steal from Uncle Sam whatever they may be able to lay their hands upon, have rushed out and located ranches upon this route; then along come Messers. Commissioners and run the road exactly where the satellites of the nigger confederacy had located.[44]

"Mono" went on to declare that although some of the road commissioners were undoubtedly "as honest as men generally are now-a-day," the spreading poison of secessionism might have "affected" them.[45]

Obviously offended by "Mono's" criticism, Tuolumne's road commissioner, Heslep, responded promptly in the next issue of the Flag with a lengthy rebuttal.

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[43]Stockton Daily Independent, 12 November 1863.

[44]American Flag, 24 October 1863.

[45]Ibid.

Heslep insisted that the road followed the best possible route down to Leavitt Meadow and that it crossed the Walker River only once. His statements were seconded by the Union surveyor, Cooper. Heslep further asserted that "Mono's" intention might have been to discredit the road commissioners so that the enterprise would be turned over to a private company.[46] As the depth of the road's financial problems were gradually uncovered in the fall of 1863, talk of enlisting a private firm to complete the work increased. Ironically, Heslep had originally been in favor of a private firm building the road.

"Mono's" informant, calling himself "Pro Bono Publico," responded to Heslep's rebuttal with a lengthy rejoinder that challenged the management of the road on a variety of points. He charged that the circuitous route of the road on the eastern slope would cost more than it should and would be covered by snow for a longer time than an alternate route. Concerning the three crossings of the Walker River in Leavitt and Pickel Meadows, he declared,

> . . . I have been over the route and seen the stakes driven along it, make out three. But be this as it may, Van Horn is going to erect a saw-mill to saw lumber for three bridges, and thinks he has a good thing. (So do I.) I don't think it would pay to put up a mill for one bridge. Van knows what he is doing and understands all the "zigzags" of the Commissioners.[47]

"Publico" further charged that the commissioners and their accomplices intended to "make all they can out of the route" and then abandon it to a private

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[46]Ibid., 29 October 1863.

[47]American Flag, 24 December 1863.

company, "leaving the Tape-worm as a monument of the honest, integrity and clearsightedness of the present Board of Road Commissioners."[48]

Critics of the road like "Publico" were clearly mystified by Heslep's role in the affair. Although they trusted him as a competent and loyal Union man, they were confused by his defense of the alleged road maladies. Heslep's haughty response to "Mono's" first letter, left some, such as "Publico," doubting Heslep's allegiance. "Publico" declared that Heslep had "placed himself in the van-guard and assumed the position and responsibilities of High-muck-a-muck to the Board."[49] Consequently, it was to Heslep that "Publico" addressed a long series of charges, disguised as questions, about the mismanagement of the road:

1. Allen and other members of the commission had overruled Heslep on numerous occasions, locating the road along a route favorable to ranches owned by Democrats on the eastern side while avoiding Union ranches on the western slope.

2. Patterson had been allowed to see Handy's estimates of costs before he submitted his bid, thus giving him an edge over other contractors.

3. Most of the commissioners had used their positions to an unfair advantage to locate ranches along the route of the road and had even jumped the claims of others.

4. Chief engineer Handy had not personally been over the whole route.

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[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid.

5. Superintendent Allen had charged the road project eight dollars a day for a span of horses and a wagon, even when not in use. He had also charged the road $1.25 per day for a "roan mare," but had given instructions that she was not to be used.

6. The road commissioners were being paid about twenty thousand dollars, more than twice what they should have been.

7. The commissioners' ultimate design was to "have the road a private enterprise, and themselves become the 'heartless, grasping monopoly.'"[50]

From Stockton chief engineer H. P. Handy reluctantly issued a response:

> . . . the Commissioners believed that they were appointed to build a wagon road, for which Copperheads, Unionists and Southern sympathizers had jointly voted an appropriation, and their first resolve was that politics should stand aside in all matters pertaining to the road.[51]

Handy went on to rebut the charges. He pointed out that although Patterson, a Democrat, had been awarded the first road contract, all of the bids had been from Democrats. The commissioners had, indeed, been aware that Patterson might "colonize" workers from other counties to vote in the upcoming election. The commission had, therefore, set the date of the bids so that it would not allow any new workers to be in Tuolumne County long enough to vote legally. Handy noted that he also had encouraged Union men to bid on the project. He further pointed out that Patterson had only been paid for the work that had been completed, that only about five thousand dollars worth of work remained to be

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[50]Ibid.

[51]Stockton Daily Independent, 31 December 1863; reprinted in Sonora Union Democrat, 16 January 1864.

done on his contracts, and that it would easily be completed the following spring.[52]

In response to the charge that the commissioners had claimed property along the route of the road, Handy admitted that they had filed for claims at Niagara Creek and Eureka Pass, but that the claims were jumped by Hulse and Hays. Handy also admitted that Allen had purchased an interest in the Strawberry Flat ranch. Instead of the twenty thousand dollars charged by "Publico" to be the salaries of the commissioners and surveyors, Handy indicated that the figure had actually been twelve thousand dollars. Allen's horses and team, according to Handy had cost less than had been claimed by "Publico." The engineer also denied that Patterson had seen his estimates before making bids on the road.[53]

Unwilling to let the matter drop, the American Flag was prompt to attack Handy's statement, arguing that the only money that had not been paid to Patterson were worthless bonds from Mono County. Most of the Flag's article, though, failed to raise any new points. Instead, it made clear that their criticism of the road was politically motivated. Handy had complained that no one from the Flag had ever contacted him for first hand information about the road. The Flag responded, "We are not in the habit of attending copperhead protracted meetings. . . ."[54]

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[52]Stockton Daily Independent, 31 December 1863.

[53]Ibid.

[54]American Flag, 7 January 1864.

In response to Allen's statement that he had come "to build a wagon road, not a political road," the Flag replied, "Considering that, excepting Mr. Heslep, the whole capoodle, commissioners, engineer, and contractor, are reputed copperheads, the impulses of Mr. Allen may be considered a metaphysical phenomenon."[55]

A month later "Publico," who resided in Aurora, continued the duel by releasing his response to Handy's statement :

> [Handy's] defence of the good faith and loyalty of the Commission doesn't come from the right quarter to meet the confidence of the community. Copperhead loyalty is indefensible; it is something that that doesn't even pass current in the nigger confederacy, where it ought to command a premium.[56]

"Publico" went on to mock the road commissioners, labelling them "Ranch Commissioners" in charge of a "Ranch Road." Still hanging onto the tail of Allen's old roan mare, "Publico" quipped, "Livery keeping pays pretty well in the mountains."[57]

While many of the charges against the road commissioners were politically motivated and trivial, several were of significance. Of particular importance was the route of the road. Wallace and Cooper's original map of 1862 did indeed show the road crossing the Walker River three times within a

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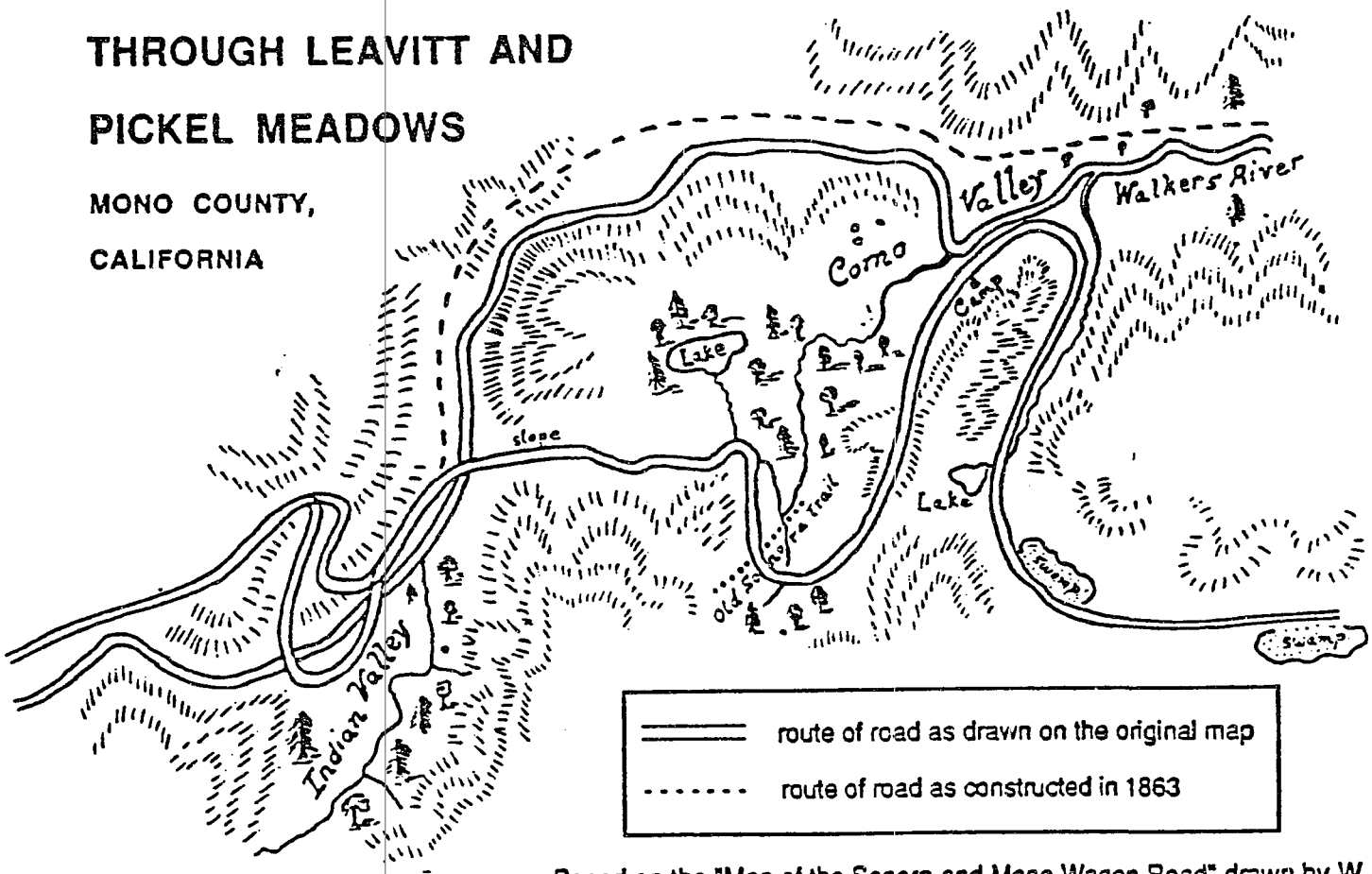
[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid., 11 February 1864.

[57]Ibid.

PROPOSED ROUTE OF THE SONORA AND MONO ROAD THROUGH LEAVITT AND PICKEL MEADOWS

MONO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA



Based on the "Map of the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road" drawn by W. S. Cooper and John Wallace, October 1862.

few miles and looping across the flats of Leavitt and Pickel Meadows.[58] The map erroneously depicted Leavitt Creek as the main channel of the Walker River and showed the original survey line making a sweeping curve across the creek and back again within a few hundred yards. Clearly delineated on the map, though, were the surveyors' adjustments to the route which eliminated the two crossings. "Publico" may have seen old stakes which may have been placed along the old survey line and pack trail.[59] Even so, the map showed two crossings of the river: one in Leavitt Meadow and the second far below Pickel Meadow at Sonora Junction. To further complicate matters, the final route of the road ignored the map completely and made no crossings of the river until below Pickel Meadow. Whatever the source of the confusion, the original road obviously was intended to snake through the valleys. The eventual alignment skirted along the northeastern side along a shorter line.

"Publico" had also charged that the commissioners had purposely avoided Andrew Fletcher's property along Sugar Pine Creek because "there existed a mean, contemptible prejudice against Fletcher, because he was a Black Republican."[60] In fact, Fletcher's property, which included the Sugar Pine Sawmill, was adjacent to a small community known as Uniontown. In the September election they had been solidly in favor of the Union ticket.[61] An

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[58]W. S. Cooper and John Wallace, "Map of the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road from Strawberry Flat to Hot Springs with the General Topography of the Adjacent Country," October, 1862, Tuolumne County Recorder's Office, Sonora, California.

[59]At several points on the map Cooper and Wallace indicated where their proposed route for the road deviated from an earlier trail. The original trail may have been blazed by Browne and Clark in the summer of 1862.

[60]American Flag, 24 December 1863.

[61]Tuolumne Courier, 5 September 1863.

early road led from the Excelsior Hotel down into the Sugar Pine Creek canyon and might easily have been included as part of the route, but it was a diversion from the more direct route selected by the commissioners.

Clearly the commissioners had used the advantage of their position to obtain titles to valuable locations along the route of the road. Except for Allen's property at Strawberry, the commissioners failed to complete the requirements of the law by making improvements on the land. "Publico" had charged that three men had put up a notice on the land at Eureka Flat and were waiting for Cooper to survey it for them when Allen and Wallace had beat them to the recorder's office and filed ahead of them.[62] "Publico" later indicated that,

> there was a rebellion in those parts about this time. The two wings of the Constitutional Democracy had a devil of a fight, and after a great deal of rattling, squirming, spitting, wiggling, and twisting, the copperheads were compelled to do some "tall walking," leaving the rattlesnakes master of the field.[63]

The confrontation may well have been between Hays and the commissioners. In the end, only Allen's acquisitions at Strawberry proved to be of particular value. Properties that he had purchased for $2200 in 1863-64 were sold in 1865 for $4000.[64]

During the months that the dispute about the management of the Sonora and Mono Road had been at its height, other political issues stirred the anger of

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[62]American Flag, 24 December 1863. The name Eureka Pass probably described the hump which rises north of the series of small flats later known as Eureka Flat.

[63]Ibid., 11 February 1864.

[64]Tuolumne County Deeds, vol. 11, p. 737; vol. 13, pp. 273, 524; vol. 13, p. 593.

the Unionists, further aggravating hostilities between the two factions. Claiming that 80 percent of naturalized citizens had voted against the Union ticket, the American Flag declared, " We doubt whether as many as two dozen Irishmen voted the Union ticket in the county. . . . the Irish, French, and Italians have been almost unanimously traitors."[65] Unionists made futile attempts to have a strict Registry Law passed that would have made it more difficult for illegal voters to cast their ballots. They also proposed laws to restrict immigration of "secessionists from Missouri, and elsewhere. . . . "[66]

In the meantime, a list of Democratic candidates appealed the validity of the soldier vote to the state Supreme Court. McCarthy complained, "Having failed to colonize and perjure quite enough of purchasable cattle, to offset the soldier vote, they now play injured innocence; and knuckle down to the Supreme Court!"[67] In February, 1864, word arrived that the Supreme Court had decided in favor of the Democrats, further outraging the Unionists.[68] In most counties where the elections had not been so close or volunteer enlistment had been low, the decision had little impact, but in Tuolumne County its effect was to return control of the county to the Democrats.[69]

The Unionists continued to charge that the Democratic dominated judicial system favored southern sympathizers. "If you should chance to transgress the

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[65]American Flag, 10 September 1863.

[66]Ibid., 5 November 1863.

[67] bid., 7 January 1863.

[68]Hildreth v. Bourland; American Flag, 11 February 1864.

[69]American Flag, 11 February 1864.

law," McCarthy wrote, "a copperhead will make out the papers, another copperhead will arrest you and another copperhead will prosecute you--and may God have mercy on your soul!" On the other hand, arguing that the Democratic judicial system would not convict criminals who favored the South, the American Flag prompted its readers toward violence, hinting that vigilantes would step in: "It is not improbable that a number of thieves and vagabonds will be hanged in this county, before spring."[70]

Although the threat of a violent confrontation in Tuolumne County lingered into the spring of 1864, citizens gradually recovered from the tumult generated by the previous fall's elections and returned their attention to the business of completing the road. The transgressions of the commissioners and Patterson had actually had little effect on the progress of the road. Those who were less concerned with political alliances than with economic gains were already quietly at work, plotting the next steps toward the road's completion. Still, the cloud of dust kicked up by the political jostling had left a stain on the record of the road commissioners that would not wash off easily.

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[70]Ibid., 7 January 1864.

CHAPTER 7

COMPLETION OF THE SONORA AND MONO WAGON ROAD

While political adversaries exchanged accusations and rebuttals, advocates of the Sonora and Mono Road turned their energies to the task of completing the trans-Sierra route. Even at the height of the controversy about the road, no one proposed that the project be abandoned. Too much money had already been invested and the prospects for economic gain were too enticing to consider discarding the half completed road. Instead, supporters of the road concentrated on devising a plan that would ensure the road's prompt completion.

The abundance of riches pouring out of Nevada had generated frenzied activity in California as miners, merchants, farmers, and traders scurried to capture a share of the prosperity. By spring 1864, few residents of the southern mining region doubted the magnitude of the Bonanza silver strikes and the potential for trade between the two states. Everything they heard from Nevada seemed to confirm predictions that the Sonora and Mono Road would be tapping into a fountain of prosperity.

From Esmeralda County came stories of immense riches yet to be extracted from the earth. Already Wells Fargo had shipped $315,500 in bullion from Aurora in the first three months of 1864.[1] Work was underway on a canal

[1]Stockton Daily Independent, 9 April 1864.

which would provide the water needed for "developing the untold millions of wealth that lie dormant in the surrounding hills."[2] A writer in Aurora, anxious to see the Sonora and Mono Road completed, painted tantalizing scenes of prosperity that were apparently just around the corner:

> . . . we may expect to hear the music of an hundred quartz mills, the booming of innumerable blasts in the surrounding hills; the rattling of a thousand wagons--then will there be abundance of employment for thousands of miners, mechanics, and others engaged in the different branches of industrial pursuits to be found in our midst.[3]

Beyond Esmeralda, spreading in every direction out across the desolate expanses of Nevada, prospectors had located mines, multiplying the demand for roads, transportation, and supplies.[4] To the north the Washoe region had produced eleven million dollars in "treasure" in 1863 and was predicted to provide triple that amount in 1864.[5] Far out in central Nevada the Reese River region had attracted thousands of miners. During the first six months of 1864, the Pioneer Stage Line carried 10,500 passengers to the remote new mining district.[6] Overcrowded stage lines between Virginia City and the Reese River were charging an exorbitant fifty dollars per passenger for the 185 mile trip.[7]

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[2]American Flag, 4 February 1864.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Stockton Daily Independent, 22 December 1863, 1 January 1864.

[5]Ibid., 12 January 1864.

[6]American Flag, 4 February 1864.

[7]Stockton Daily Independent, 31 March 1864.

To the south the Owens Valley was only the most recent discovery in a chain of strikes scattered along the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Agriculture and mineral developments there prompted one writer to predict that "freight and travel to that valley and its surrounding districts, this year, will equal or exceed that coming to Aurora, all of which would come over the new road were it open."[8] The demand for goods there, as elsewhere in Nevada, was so high that prices soared. Barley in the Owens Valley, for example, sold for double its price in Stockton.[9] Most products sold for fifteen to twenty cents a pound more in Nevada than in California cities.[10]

Looking ahead, one newspaper predicted that in a year and half, trade between California and Nevada would be four times greater than in 1863.[11] Another optimistic proponent of the road projected that trade to the Colorado River, which was currently going to Los Angeles, would be diverted to the Sonora and Mono Road.[12] Still others claimed that the new road would carry a portion of the trade to Salt Lake and Idaho.[13]

Had the reports of prosperity in Nevada not been convincing by themselves, residents of the southern mining region had only to look once again to the Placerville Road as an example of what they could expect to

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[8]American Flag, 4 February 1864.

[9]Stockton Daily Independent, 20, 23 January 1864.

[10]Ibid., 7 March, 1 April 1864.

[11]Ibid., 1 December 1863.

[12]Ibid., 3 March 1864.

[13]Sonora Union Democrat, 16 April 1864.

achieve. The Stockton Daily Independent announced that the Placerville Road had brought in 1.5 million dollars in tolls in 1863. Other statistics from the Placerville Road were equally impressive. During the winter months of January to April, when most routes were close by snow, Placerville recorded the passage of 2,564 teams, 6,607 footmen, and 3,154 stage passengers. Beginning in mid-May, 233 tons of freight per day were crossing over the road.[14]

Work on other roads in the region served as a further incentive to spur the prompt completion of the Sonora and Mono Road. An observer in Aurora pointed out that new roads would soon be built to Esmeralda that would preempt a substantial amount of the trade which would otherwise patronize the Sonora and Mono Road.[15] Progress on the Big Trees Road was continuing steadily, and the route was expected to be completed over the summit to Silver Mountain by April.[16] Previously the Big Trees Road had not been considered in competition with the Sonora and Mono Road, but in 1864 construction began on a new road that would connect Silver Mountain with Antelope Valley.[17] Once completed it would allow freight from Stockton to travel the Big Trees Road to Aurora almost as easily as via the Sonora and Mono Road.

Those building a case in favor of the Sonora and Mono Road had no difficulty in finding examples of flourishing mines, expanding trade, and

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[14]American Flag, 4 February 1864.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Stockton Daily Independent, 5 January 1864.

[17]Esmeralda Daily Union, 13 July 1864.

successful roads to justify their cause. The dissemination of these tales of opulence, though, tended to blind residents of the southern mines to the precarious structure of an economy heavily dependent on the success of the mining industry.

A Public Versus a Private Company

While some were still grumbling about rigged elections and zig-zagging roads, the delegates from Tuolumne, San Joaquin, Mono, and Stanislaus Counties met in the Senate Chambers in Sacramento on December 18, 1863, to discuss how to proceed with the road. In light of the recent events, they agreed that their counties would not support further bond issues and that the franchise should be turned over to a private company. A committee was appointed to draft the appropriate legislation and submit it to the legislature.[18] When word of their intentions filtered back to the various counties, it sparked a new controversy.

Disagreement revolved around the legislature's decision to turn the road over to a private company. The swift, and apparently secretive, action of the delegates generated immediate concern. Critics, suspecting favoritism or corruption, questioned why the delegates were moving so hastily without bringing the issue up for public discussion. As details of their arrangement became known, objections to their action escalated. Some who opposed the

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[18]Stockton Daily Independent, 21 December 1863. At the meeting were Lt. Governor Machin and Mr. Lux, representing Mono County; Senators Evans and Haskins, Assemblyman Perrin, and Mr. Bradbury, representing Tuolumne County; Assemblyman Dickinson of Stanislaus County; and Senator Meyers, Assemblyman Allen, Messers Clayes and Keyes of San Joaquin County.

plan were convinced that it was the product of political scheming, while others suspected the machinations of capitalists. Some critics regarded it as economic maneuvering designed to benefit a few at the expense of the majority.

A number of residents believed that the delegates had been premature in their assumption that the voters would not support further bond measures. A writer from Stanislaus claimed that the influential residents of his county, especially around Knights Ferry, strongly favored further county bonds.[19] He argued that his assemblyman, William L. Dickinson, the only Democrat in the road delegation, favored the interests of his constituents in Merced County more than those in Stanislaus. Stanislaus County and especially Merced County were both known to be strongly Democratic. The Stanislaus writer complained that Dickinson was reflecting the views of a few who were only interested in "the Highwaymen of Dixie and the land of cotton."[20]

The American Flag contended that residents of Tuolumne County also would support further bonds for the road and that in San Joaquin County a number of prominent men had indicated that they too favored another bond election.[21] The Flag pointed out that if the counties invested more money in the road, it would easily be repaid within the first year of its operation by imposing only modest tolls.[22]

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[19]American Flag, 7 January 1864.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., 11 February 1864.

[22]Ibid., 7 January 1864.

Many who had objected to the way the road had been managed in 1863 were convinced that transferring it to a private enterprise would play directly into the hands of Patterson and Allen.[23] In February the American Flag, believing that Patterson and Allen were to be granted ownership of the road, declared its opposition to turning the road over to a private company. According to the Flag, Patterson had been in San Francisco displaying a map of the road, apparently seeking financial backing for his new company. Both of the other local Union newspapers, though, the Stockton Daily Independent and the Tuolumne Courier, had come out in support of the plan to turn the road over to a private firm. McCarthy charged that O. M. Clayes, editor of the Independent, was also a member of the new company that was to be granted ownership of the road.[24]

As soon as the legislation was drafted, another issue was raised by opponents of the franchise. The bill failed to include any compensation for the counties which had already spent $135,000 on the road. (Apparently Mono County had never sold its $15,000 of bonds.) Awarding the franchise to a private company, they argued, was tantamount to granting them a $135,000 gift. The American Eagle, which replaced McCarthy's Flag when he moved to San Francisco, declared that another company existed that would take over the road and repay the counties their investment.[25] In perhaps their first agreement in months with a Republican paper, the Union Democrat voiced similar concerns, wondering why a specific company was being designated by the

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[23]American Flag, 4 February 1864.

[24]Ibid., 11 February 1864.

[25]American Eagle, 3 March 1864.

legislation rather than calling for bids. The Democrat suggested that another company might be willing to complete the road for less money.[26] Others wondered how a private company could be any more successful at building the road and making it self-supporting than the counties had been.[27]

Keeping the road in the hands of the people and out of the pockets of capitalists became a rallying point for many. Tuolumne County residents had watched all three of its major canal projects slip out of local ownership and fall under the control of Sacramento and San Francisco capitalists.[28] Other roads, such as the Placerville Road, they claimed, had fallen into the hands of capitalists, resulting in abnormally high tolls. In their opinion the Sonora and Mono Road was "the only free rout [sic] that is left from the band and grasp of capitalists."[29]

Animosity toward outside capitalists was deeply rooted in Tuolumne County. When capitalists had taken ownership of the Columbia and Stanislaus River Water Company ditch in 1860, a band of disgruntled workers had roamed the mountains sabotaging the canal with apparent impunity from local law officials.[30] Three years later a disgruntled resident announced in the Union Democrat that he was ready to use the same tactics to retain control of the

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[26]Sonora Union Democrat, 5 April 1864.

[27]Stockton Daily Independent, 28 December 1863.

[28]See James M. Young, "Columbia and the Miners' Struggle for Water," MA Thesis, San Jose State, 1963, p. 44; David H. Johnson, "The History of the Columbia and Stanislaus River Water Company," 1988, Unpublished manuscript, Tuolumne County Historical Society, Sonora, California; and Columbia Gazette, 11 November 1854.

[29]American Flag, 7 January 1864.

[30]Columbia Times, 28 February 1861.

road: ". . . rather than be joshed out of it he would rather spend ten times as much more in gunpowder and blow up the bridges there on monthly. The road belongs to the people. . . ."[31]

While many of the objections raised by the plan's opponents were valid, they were overshadowed by the dissatisfaction with the road commissioners and by economic realities. As a resident of Aurora explained, they favored the taxpayers continuing to finance the road, but they themselves were "in the condition of church mice" and could not contribute to the cause.[32] Surprisingly no one seemed concerned by Aurora's plea of destitution when the town's prosperity was being advertised as a key reason for building the road. Aurora's citizens were not the only ones who considered themselves members of the church mice congregation. A declining population in Tuolumne County had left a heavy burden of indebtedness on those who remained.[33]

Persuaded by the outcries of mismanagement and corruption in 1863 and reluctant to invest further public money, the majority of the people, including county leaders, favored passing the responsibilities of construction and maintenance to a private company. Even in San Joaquin County, where the political bickering had been of less importance than in Tuolumne County, many residents approved of the idea of turning the road over to a private company. They were convinced that the county would never support another bond issue or that, even if they did, the election would cause too much of a delay. A private

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[31]Sonora Union Democrat, 26 December 1863.

[32]American Flag, 4 February 1864.

[33]Tuolumne Courier, 14 February 1863.

company, they argued, would pay back the counties what they had already invested and would maintain the road to protect their investment.[34]

The political disputes and allegations of mismanagement of 1863 had also convinced many in Tuolumne County that the project was too important to be left in the hands of politicians. One writer argued,

> We are satisfied that under present management, the road will not be finished next year [1864] and that after the new assessment of $150,000 is expended, still another will be found necessary. And after all, we shall have a road badly located, and kept in miserable condition. If the present commission is ousted, shall we succeed in getting a better one? It appears to us, as matters stand, that the only way we can secure a good road in a short time, is to turn the road over to a chartered company, restricting them to reasonable tolls, and requiring them to refund the moneys already expended.[35]

Additional details regarding the mismanagement of the road trickled into the light in the spring of 1864, further convincing many that a private company would do a better job of managing the road. Columbia's Tuolumne Courier reported that some of the road bonds, which by statute were to be sold for no less that eighty-five cents on the dollar, had been sold for as little as forty-eight cents.[36] The Courier favored the idea of a private company, declaring,

> Stealing and politics would have a poor showing if a company of business men obtained this franchise; besides, the people would speedily have a good road, always kept in splendid condition, and would not be

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[34]Stockton Daily Independent, 1 December 1863.

[35]Tuolumne Courier, 26 December 1863.

[36]Ibid., 20 February 1864.

taxed to death for the benefit of political bummers, dishonest contractors and lazy road overseers.[37]

In an editorial, the Stockton Daily Independent professed that when the road project had first been proposed, it had questioned the $150,000 price tag but had been "flouted for our presumption."[38] (In truth the Independent had been responsible for many of the misconceptions about the road that had been circulated and had campaigned vigorously in support of it). The editors went on to declare that the people of San Joaquin County had bargained for a road at that price but were only given half a road. Consequently the Independent endorsed the plan to grant a private franchise, arguing that bonds did not produce enough cash and that a private company would maintain the road and perhaps pay back the counties what had already been invested. The editors argued that what was needed was a road to the Nevada silver mines: "If we cannot get it as cheaply as we desire to, the next best thing is to get it, and that quickly."[39]

A concerned resident of Aurora agreed that the franchise should be given to a private company: "It will benefit property holders just as much by the travel, and save the counties interested from being most outrageously swindled by mismanagement of the road after it is finished."[40] The Esmeralda Daily Union

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[37]Ibid., 10 February 1864.

[38]Stockton Daily Independent, 27 January 1864.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Sonora Union Democrat, 16 April 1864.

in Aurora echoed the sentiments of many declaring, "We care but little who does the work. We are anxious to see it completed without delay. . . "[41]

Franchise Granted to Private Company

While their constituents debated the merits of a public versus a private road, the delegates in Sacramento pressed ahead with their original plan. All of the delegates were prominent businessmen and landowners who undoubtedly realized that the rapid completion of the road was more important than who built it. Their properties and businesses would profit considerably by the completion of the road. One of the delegates, J. W. Haskins, had more than average interest in the development of the road. Haskins, who had recently been elected senator from Tuolumne and Mono Counties in a disputed contest with C. H. Randall, had invested in a toll road that had been constructed from Aurora to Bridgeport.[42] Its success would be greatly enhanced by the completion of the Sonora and Mono Road.

On February 6, 1864, San Joaquin County's Assemblyman E. H. Allen introduced AB 245, and by March 5 it had passed both houses and been approved by Governor Low.[43] The legislation granted the road franchise to a private company composed of a cross-section of men from San Francisco, Stockton, Tuolumne, and Mono. Among them was former road superintendent,

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[41]Esmeralda Daily Union, 7 May 1864.

[42]Maxine Chappell, "Early History of Mono County," California Historical Society Quarterly 26 (September 1947): 242-43.

[43]Assembly Journal (Sacramento, 1864), 318, 461.

James Allen. Under the terms of the legislation, the company was to complete a single track by September 1 and a double track by the following summer. They were to be given possession of the franchise for twenty years. Tolls could not exceed three dollars for a horse and rider, six dollars for a stage or freight wagon, and from twenty-five to fifty cents a head for loose animals. To avoid delays by the new company, the legislation stipulated that the company have at least twenty-five laborers at work on the road by May 1, 1864.[44]

The new company, known as the "State Line Turnpike Company," was reported to have $500,000 in capital. Allen and two San Franciscans, B. W. Hathaway and William Lent, were elected as trustees.[45] According to reports in April, they were merely waiting for the snow to melt before commencing work.[46] Then suddenly a week later word spread that the new company would be compelled to abandon the project. Financing for the road had been dependent upon their being able to put up the road as collateral. A state Supreme Court ruling, however, declared that the mortgage arrangement was illegal. Without financing, the company collapsed, returning the problem once again to the hands of the county supervisors.[47]

. Following the provisions of the legislation, the supervisors met at Knights Ferry on May 12 and agreed to advertise for bids from other companies

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[44]Statutes of California, Fifteenth Session, Chapter CLXIV.

[45]Lent later became one of the principal financiers of the first major mine in Bodie.

[46]Stockton Daily Independent, 22 April 1864.

[47]Ibid., 29 April 1864.

to complete the road.[48] When they met again on May 20, only one company had made a bid: Patterson and Allen. The pair offered to build the road following substantially the same provisions outlined in the legislation, except that the tolls would be increased by about twenty-five percent. A single track was to be completed in 1864 and the full road by October 1, 1865. Failure to meet these deadlines would cause the road to revert to the counties. The supervisors voted unanimously to grant them the franchise.[49]

Calling themselves the "Sonora and Mono Wagon Road Company," Patterson and Allen incorporated and began to raise a capital stock of $300,000 at $100 per share.[50] Realizing that the economic benefits of the road far outweighed the significance of any remaining dissension, the American Eagle threw its support behind the new company and urged residents to buy their stock. The Eagle echoed the old refrain of economic incentives for building the road, while avoiding any gibes about copperheads, zig-zags, or roan mares.[51] The political storm appeared to have blown itself out.

A month later, though, a contributor to the Eagle, using the sobriquet "Query," turned a captious eye on the road project once again. In a lengthy article he charged that Patterson had not completed the work he had been paid to do the previous year, that large boulders obstructed the road, and that an insufficient number of men had been employed to complete the work. Sale of

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[48]Ibid., 16 May 1864; Sonora Union Democrat, 14 May 1864.

[49]American Eagle, 4 June 1864.

[50]Sonora Union Democrat, 28 May 1864.

[51]American Eagle, 4 June 1864.

stock, according to "Query," had not been as high as expected because Patterson and Allen had made no concerted effort to sell it. "Query" asserted that Patterson and Allen "flatter themselves competent to build the road alone."[52] Their intention, the writer charged, was to borrow money on completed portions of the road to finance future sections. The plan, of course, was not much different than that of the previous road company that had been forced to surrender its charter.

In fact, Patterson and Allen had concentrated their crews on the lower section of the road to complete it to a standard which would justify their charging tolls. By mid-July the road was finished to Eureka Valley, fifty-six miles east of Sonora, and toll gates had been erected in Eureka Valley and at Long Barn.[53] Patterson and Allen intended to use the income from tolls to help finance the remainder of the road. The upper portion of the road, though, which traversed the steep canyon sides along Deadman Creek, was impassable for some time even to stock.[54] Consequently, traffic was light and income from tolls could not have been significant. During September Patterson and Allen added seventy men from Bridgeport and Aurora to their work crews which already numbered three hundred. An Aurora paper reported that the contractors were hiring every man who requested employment.[55]

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[52]Ibid., 30 July 1864.

[53]Sonora Union Democrat, 16 July 1864.

[54]American Eagle, 27 August 1864. Deadman Creek did not earn its name until several years later when a mountain traveler perished in a snowstorm beside its bank. Previously it had been called Rattlesnake Creek by Brannock and the East Fork of the Main Fork of the Stanislaus River by the 1863 road survey team.

[55]Esmeralda Daily Union, 1, 5 August 1864.

Insinuations that Patterson and Allen were suffering from financial difficulties began to appear in August. The Eagle published a contrived interview between "Tuolumne" and an unnamed observer charging that many of the road workers had quit because the scrip being paid to them by Allen was not even good at Allen's own store. The observer claimed that Patterson and Allen had cajoled the workers as long as they could, promising eventual payment if they would keep working. When they could stall no longer, the two contractors had finally confessed the truth. The workers reacted angrily at first:

> Some called for ropes. Some threatened to destroy the road. . . . But after the first excitement had subsided, all plainly saw that violence would not help the matter, and so while a large number with sad hearts started for Sonora, the balance being promised some clothing, concluded to remain and work on.[56]

The Union Democrat, which viewed Patterson and Allen's difficulties more sympathetically than the Eagle, explained that the company had relied "too confidently upon the liberality of the community generally and especially upon those whose property would be immediately benefited. . . ."[57] The Democrat reported that 150 men agreed to remain on the job, receiving board, clothes, tobacco, and the promise that they would be paid as soon as the company was solvent.[58]

Echoing the concerns of others that Patterson and Allen would request an extension on their contract when they failed to meet the November 1 deadline,

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[56]American Eagle, 27 August 1864.

[57]Sonora Union Democrat, 27 August 1864.

[58]Ibid.

"Tuolumne" argued that their extension should be refused, declaring, "To extend their franchise therefore will only increase their facilities for duping honest laborers."[59] The similarities between the Mono Road project and the earlier Columbia and Stanislaus River Water Company catastrophe were not lost on local residents. Some feared that the workers would "make a second Columbia ditch of the road."[60] Tuolumne argued that in order to avoid another rebellion when Patterson and Allen defaulted, the counties should reclaim the road and pay the workers.

Contrary to the expectations of some, Patterson and Allen completed the single track from Sonora to Aurora before the November 1 deadline. The first recorded crossing of the road by vehicle was done by B. O. Marston and M. M. Rumbly who guided their "loaded buggy" over the mountain. A few days later George McQuade, D. W. Tulloch, and one other man stacked their wagons with flour and headed up the Mono Road for Aurora, the first freight wagons to use the new road.[61] Within a month, however, winter snows had closed the road until the following June, providing too little time for regular freight and stage lines to be established in 1864.

Nevada Mining Crash

The same year that the Sonora and Mono Road was completed, the mining boom in Esmeralda and other parts of Nevada collapsed. Hints of the

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[59]American Eagle, 27 August 1864.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Sonora Union Democrat, 8 October 1864.

decline had begun to appear in the summer of 1864, and by the spring of 1865 hundreds of mines stood abandoned and towns half empty. Most of the leads in Aurora had been shallow, playing out at a little more than a hundred feet in depth.[62] Stocks plummeted, companies dissolved, and miners set out in search of better locations. The stock of one of the leading mines in Aurora, the Del Monte, had been selling for $38 a share in March. By September it had dropped to $18.[63] Wages at the mine were reduced from as much as $5.00 a day to $3.50.[64] Esmeralda's assessed tax value in 1864 was 1.5 million dollars, but a year later it sank to only .8 million.[65] Other regions of Nevada suffered similar declines. The Reese River, although it would still attract considerable attention, had peaked in 1864.[66] Even the prosperous Washoe district production had dropped significantly. The situation in California's gold fields was equally as grim. For ten years California had maintained a steady annual output of between fifty and sixty million dollars in gold. Suddenly in 1864 the production fell to thirty-five million.[67] In the course of a year many of the compelling reasons for building the Sonora and Mono Road had begun to evaporate.

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[62]Kersten, "The Early Settlement of Aurora," 501-02.

[63]Esmeralda Daily Union, 30 March and 16 September 1864.

[64]Ibid., 1 August 1864. Typical wages had been $4-5 per day.

[65]"First Annual Report of the Controller," Nevada Senate Journal, 20-21.

[66]Elliot, History of Nevada, 102.

[67]History of El Dorado County, (Oakland: Paolo Sioli, Pub., 1883), 66. Gold production in California continued a gradual decline after 1864.

CHAPTER 8

NINETEENTH CENTURY USE OF THE SONORA AND MONO WAGON ROAD

The record of the Sonora and Mono Road throughout the nineteenth century was a disappointment for most Tuolumne County residents. Except for a brief interval in 1878-81 when the Bodie mines were in full operation, the road never became the bustling artery that its promoters had envisioned. Franchise holders, still convinced that improvements to the road would eventually attract the heavy commercial use that had been originally projected, continued to work on the route. Some citizens of the southern mines, who were frustrated by the lack of patronage of the road, looked for additional enticements such as railroad connections that would encourage more trade over the wagon route.

For those still expecting the road to reverse the economic slide in the foothill communities, the continued efforts to promote Sonora and Mono Road would prove disappointing. California's mining counties, which had luxuriated in positions of prominence and wealth in the state for over a decade, had begun an inevitable decline. As mining declined, populations shifted to other regions of the state. Between 1860 and 1870, Tuolumne County's population dropped from sixteen thousand to eight thousand.[1] Tuolumne County's tax assessments fell from a high of 3.3 million dollars in 1860 to 1.2 million by

[1]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the U.S., Tuolumne County, 1860; Ninth Census of the U.S., Tuolumne County, 1870.

1870.[2] Other mining counties experienced parallel decreases in population and wealth. In contrast, agricultural counties such as Sacramento and San Joaquin were gaining in population and wealth during this same period. For Tuolumne County and other mining regions it was a period of difficult adjustment. Few were ready to concede that the boom days were gone forever. The continued efforts to bolster the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road reflected the persistent optimism of those who still dreamed of a resurrection of prosperity.

Continued Criticism of Road Management

Patterson and Allen continued to work on the road through 1865, widening the track and repairing damage caused by slides and the spring run-off.[3] Although the contract called for the completion of the road by the end of 1865, the contractors were granted a two year extension by the supervisors.[4] No records have survived providing figures on the amount of use the road received during any of its years of operation, but anecdotal accounts indicate that a substantial number of wagons took advantage of the new route in 1865. One optimistic observer declared that travel on the road had been "greater than the most sanguine anticipated."[5] Other signs, however, indicate that the road did not get as much use in 1865 as had been expected. Clark had begun a

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[2]California Senate Journal Appendix (Sacramento: State Printer, 1860-1870).

[3]Sonora Union Democrat, 27 May 1865.

[4]William F. Speer, Sonora Union Democrat, 16 April 1952.

[5]Sonora Union Democrat, 21 October 1865.

stage line between Sonora and Sugar Pine, but by October it was discontinued. A writer noted that "Travelers on that road have rough times."[6]

By 1866, the impact of the mining decline in both Nevada and California had clearly manifested itself in the southern mines. Columbia reported an exodus of its citizens.[7] Sonora was described as having "almost deserted streets" with merchants "sitting on their counters twirling [their] thumbs."[8] In Knights Ferry the firm of Palmer and Allen closed its doors in September, sixteen thousand dollars in debt.[9]

Patterson apparently abandoned the road project in 1865 and moved on to Nevada, leaving Allen to struggle to meet the terms of the contract.[10] Only able to afford a small crew, Allen was forced to concentrate work on repairing winter damage to make the road passable in the spring. He had to rely on the meager income from tolls to finance repairs and improvements.[11] By the summer of 1866, Allen had only completed about forty miles of the double track.[12] Critics charged that an inadequate number of culverts had been constructed along the road, while the portion of road leading up to Sugar Pine

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[6]Tuolumne Courier, 21 October 1865.

[7]Sonora Union Democrat, 29 September 1866.

[8]Ibid., 23 June 1866.

[9]Ibid., 22 September 1866.

[10]J. D. Patterson appears in the 1870 census in White Pine County, Nevada, and in the 1880 census in Eureka County, Nevada.

[11]Tuolumne Courier, 11 July 1866.

[12]Sonora Union Democrat, 11 August 1866.

was described as being full of stumps, rocks, and deep ruts.[13] One traveler commented that the snow and rain in the spring made the mountain road "as mushy as a turtle's nest."[14] By summer the mud had turned to dust and Allen had to employ water carts to sprinkle part of the route.[15]

As a result of its late opening in 1866, the road lost many of its customers to other routes. Some argued that if the road were kept open all year that it would attract more business. One man suggested that twenty Chinese laborers, paid a dollar a day, could keep the road open throughout the winter. He blamed the road managers for their failure to take full advantage of the road's potential: ". . . whilst in Sonora he never saw men who seemed to display so little energy in regard to a matter of such vital importance. . . . it does seem strange that men can be so blind to their own interests."[16]

Once the route was finally opened in the summer of 1866, a number of articles appeared in newspapers extolling the virtues of the Sonora and Mono Road but also indicating that the public had not taken full advantage of it. In Alta California, "Rambler" explained in detail how much cheaper and quicker the Sonora route was to Aurora than the Placerville Road. A four horse team on the Placerville Road paid forty dollars in tolls, while the same rig crossed the

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[13]Ibid., 9 June 1866.

[14]Tuolumne Courier, 17 March 1866. Years later a state inspection of the highway concluded that 258 culverts would be required to bring the road up to standards. See "Report of the Department of Highways," Appendix of the Thirty-Sixth Session of the Legislature, vol. 1 (Sacramento: State Printer, 1904), 16.

[15]Sonora Union Democrat, 11 August 1866.

[16]Ibid., 23 June 1866.

Sonora Road for only twelve.[17] Stage fares cost passengers forty dollars on the Placerville Road, but on the Sonora Road they were a mere fifteen.[18] Freight, which averaged eight cents a pound to ship from Placerville to Aurora, could be transported by the Sonora route for half that amount.[19]

"Rambler" found himself musing, "Why your capitalists do not take hold of it, is a matter of surprise to your correspondent."[20] He believed that if the price of goods were reduced by using the Sonora route, then miners would be more willing to work for reasonable wages in the Nevada mines. He also argued that unemployed men from San Francisco could easily walk the new road to the Nevada mines for a mere five dollars.[21]

The Sonora Herald reported that the route was in daily use by teams and wagons in 1866.[22] Another measure of the road's use in 1866 comes from the Parson and Marden stage line, which through September only ran a weekly stage from Sonora to Aurora.[23] In contrast, the Placerville Road carried daily stages. Despite the lack of patronage for the new road, proponents continued to speak with blind optimism, declaring, "In another year this road will be the

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[17]Ibid., 15 September 1866, reprint from Daily Alta California, 13 July 1866.

[18]Sonora Union Democrat, 11 August 1866.

[19]Ibid., 15 September 1866, reprint from Daily Alta California, 13 July 1866.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Sonora Herald, 4 August 1866.

[23]Sonora Union Democrat, 15 September 1866, reprint from Daily Alta California, 13 July 1866.

great thoroughfare for travelers and freight destined for the other side of the Sierras."[24]

In the spring of 1867, the Sonora Herald reported that the Mono Road could have captured a large share of the trade which eventually went over the Placerville Road, but that Allen would not take the steps necessary to open the road. A group of men, anxious to see the road in use, approached Allen and proposed that they open the road and operate it themselves, but Allen would not give them a definite response. According to the Herald, two hundred tons of freight sat waiting in Stockton because Allen had not opened the road.[25]

A critic writing for the Tuolumne Courier complained of the condition of the road, pointing out that the sharp turns and narrow roadway made it impassable for large teams. In some places, he noted, " a simple four horse wagon would find it difficult to get along."[26] Demonstrating that the earlier allegations of corruption had not yet been forgotten, the writer alluded to the possibility of collusion between Allen and the owners of the Placerville Road, and then declared, "Sonora has been defrauded of her rights by the underhanded scheming of parties interested in other and inferior routes long enough."[27]

Despite criticisms of the road, optimism still lingered and the local newspapers continued to promote its use. The Sonora Herald listed all the latest mining strikes in Mono County and declared that the road was in splendid

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[24]Sonora Union Democrat, 11 August 1866.

[25]Sonora Herald, 15 June 1867.

[26]Tuolumne Courier, 11 July 1866.

[27]Ibid.

condition. Then, borrowing a phrase from the 1853 wagon trail proponents, it added that "a small expenditure of money judicially applied, would make it an easy route. . . "[28] Several stage lines ran between Sonora, Bridgeport, and Aurora during the summer months, but for half the year the road was closed by snow.[29]

New Contractors Take Over the Road

By the fall of 1867, Allen had failed to live up to the terms of the contract and representatives of the various counties met in Knights Ferry on November 26 to determine the fate of the road. The Tuolumne County supervisors indicated that Patterson and Allen had not fulfilled the requirements of section three of the contract which specified a double track and a moderate grade.[30] Allen did not contest the allegations, but he was not ready to relinquish the franchise. In a statement to the delegates he summarized the expenses and difficulties he had encountered. He pointed out that his company had

> completed a portion of the road according to specifications for that year [1864], also the bridges at a cost of about $65,000. Since that time I have built about 10 miles of new road on this end, and repaired and widened nearly all the way, at about a cost of $15,000. But, owing to unforeseen events such as the downfall of mining and business interests in the County that the road tapped on the other side of the mountains in 1864-65, and the dry year with high prices for provisions; war time and all combined has made it impossible to comply with the specifications of the contract in the stringent form but, have caused to be spent about $80,000, much of which

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[28]Sonora Herald, 14 September 1867.

[29]Ibid., 29 September 1867.

[30]Stockton Daily Independent, 14 November 1867.

> looks to me for payment etc; I propose that you give me a franchise for the balance of the time it was first given. . . . [31]

The supervisors had seen enough of Allen and declined to renew his franchise. Instead they turned to a new coalition of men who had organized to operate the road. Most were businessmen and landowners in Sonora and along the route of the road: Terrence Clark operated a liquor store in Sonora, John L. Bourland was sheriff of Tuolumne County, Thomas J. Northrup operated the popular Excelsior Hotel in Sugar Pine, Chester Comstock owned a ranch and mining land along the road, and Henry Christopher Shultz was a Sonora merchant. Other members of the company included John N. Faughnan, P. M. Fisher, and John Monahan.[32] Under the terms of the new contract, the company was to

> complete the upper portion of the road, including the grade around the "Hog's Back" and widen and straighten the road at other points on the line, so as to put it in good condition for eight mule teams within one year from Jan. 15th, 1868, and to have the entire road . . . completed within three years from that date. They also agree to conform to the original grade. . . . [33]

During the summer of 1868, the new company made improvements on the road, but with the continuing decline of mining and business, the road was not heavily traveled. In 1869, a bridge across the Walker River below Leavitt Meadow was installed.[34] By 1870, merchants in Sonora claimed they had

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[31]J. R. Hall, "History of the Sonora-Mono Road," TMs, 30 September 1929, Stanislaus National Forest Headquarters, Sonora, California.

[32]Sonora Union Democrat, 14 December 1867; Tuolumne County Census, 1860, 1870; Great Register of Tuolumne County, 1867.

[33]Ibid. The Hog's Back referred to a section of road about 2.5 miles west of the summit.

[34]Sonora Union Democrat, 19 December 1868; 29 May 1869.

"reached the bottom of this downward course. . . ."[35] The Sonora and Mono Road, despite all of the predictions of the lavish wealth to be realized by its completion, had not rescued the southern mining counties from their economic decline. In 1872, when Tuolumne County's road bonds became due, there was not enough money in the fund to meet the expenses. Declines in population had diminished the revenue income. As a consequence, a special tax had to be levied.[36]

Throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s, travel on the road was sparse. The depreciated value of the road was illustrated in 1876 when George McQuade and Frank Doten purchased the road franchise from William Clark for one thousand dollars .[37] Among those who used the road at this time were ranchers from Tuolumne County who delivered wagon loads of fruit to Bridgeport and other communities on the eastern side of the mountains. Prospectors continued to make new finds there, small boom towns sprang up in places such as Kearsage, and a moderate demand for goods remained. Older mining communities continued to generate some trade. Besides providing a route for freight wagons to Nevada, the Sonora and Mono Road also furnished access for cattlemen and sheep herders to grazing lands in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and beyond and served as an outlet for a trickle of miners leaving the southern mines for distant locations such as Idaho or Montana.[38]

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[35]Ibid., 21 May 1870.

[36]Democratic Banner, 9 March 1872.

[37]Sonora Union Democrat, 1 April 1876.

[38]Ibid., 27 May 1865.

When it became evident that the new road would not attract the commerce that had been expected, interest shifted to the idea of a railroad. In 1869 proposals were made to establish a railroad from Stockton to Sonora and even over the Sierra Nevada.[39] With seemingly undying optimism the Union Democrat declared "If a railroad were built to Sonora, that hitherto poor investment, the Sonora and Mono Road, would become a source of great profit to the county."[40] The arguments in favor of the railroad had a familiar, hollow ring: "Sonora would be the supply center. . . more travel. . . our mountains will be filled with tourists. . . all travel to Yosemite would be via Sonora. . . . Sonora would be the depot for an immense extent of the country. . . property now worth seven hundred dollars would then be worth five thousand."[41] Despite periodic revivals of the proposal, railroads did not penetrate Tuolumne County until the late 1890s.[42]

Bodie

The pastoral atmosphere of the Sonora and Mono Road was suddenly shattered in 1878 when miners in Bodie, eleven miles east of Bridgeport, struck the rich veins that had eluded prospectors there for nineteen years. The

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[39]Sonora Union Democrat, 3 April 1869.

[40]Ibid., 8 May 1869.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Dorothy Newell Deane, Sierra Railway (Berkeley: Howell-North, 1960), 33, 51.

population of the town rapidly swelled to over ten thousand.[43] For the next three years the Bodie strike brought a return of the bustling times of the 1850s. Bodie became a boom town and the Sonora and Mono Road finally provided the avenue for commerce that had been predicted so many years earlier. New stage lines were formed in Sonora.[44] Stages, freight wagons, pack trains and footmen crowded the road. As many as fifty teams were across the mountains selling goods in Bodie at any one time.[45] H. C. Shultz, who had been one of the partners to operate the Sonora and Mono Road in the late 1860s, managed the road through the Bodie years.

In 1881 the Carson and Colorado Railroad completed a narrow gauge line connecting the Virginia and Truckee Railroad to a point within thirty miles of Bodie, thus attracting a portion of the commerce that might have used the Sonora and Mono Road.[46] Although Bodie continued as an active mining town until about 1888, by 1882 the frantic boom days were over and traffic on the Sonora and Mono Road returned to its leisurely pace.

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[43]Ella M. Cain, The Story of Bodie (San Francisco: Fearon Publishers, 1956), 13-15; Kersten, "The Early Settlement of Aurora," 504.

[44]Sonora Union Democrat, 18 May 1878.

[45]Ibid., 29 May 1879.

[46]Kersten, "The Early Settlement of Aurora," 505-06.

Decline of the Sonora and Mono Road

In 1883 the Board of Supervisors granted the road franchise to the Mono County line to J. B. Carter.[47] Carter and Shultz also applied to the Mono County Board of Supervisors for permission to operate that section of the road.[48] Records indicate that Samuel Fales, proprietor of the Hot Springs adjacent to the road fourteen miles west of Bridgeport operated the Mono County portion of the road in 1888.[49] Used only by occasional fruit wagons, sporadic travelers, and herdsmen, the Sonora and Mono Road languished into disrepair.[50]

In 1896, when J. B. Carter died, his wife Alice took possession of the franchise.[51] A year later, with only a few months remaining on the charter, she surrendered it to the county.[52] Then Greenberry Columbus Baker, proprietor of the Baker Station stage depot on the road several miles east of Eureka Valley, took over the road for a short period of time. Baker had also operated various hotels in Tuolumne County. In 1897, he was granted the franchise for the Mono County portion of the road by the Mono County Board of Supervisors.[53] Within a year, though, he had given up the Mono County section.[54]

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[47]J. R. Hall, "History of the Sonora-Mono Road," 4.

[48]Bridgeport Chronicle-Union, 24 March 1883.

[49]Ibid., 2 June 1888.

[50]Ibid., 16 July 1892; 29 July 1893; 17 July 1897.

[51]Democratic Banner, 3 April, 14 August 1896.

[52]Ibid., 31 December 1897.

[53]Bridgeport Chronicle-Union, 28 August 1897.

[54]Democratic Banner, 1 July 1898.

In March 1901, California's Governor Henry Gage signed legislation which made the Sonora and Mono Road part of the state highway system.[55] Engineers reported that the twenty-two miles leading over the summit were "nothing more than a creek bed," and that numerous bridges were rotten or had fallen down.[56] Finally in 1906, when the Union Construction Company undertook the construction of Relief Dam on the Middle Fork of the Stanislaus River between Kennedy Meadows and Relief Valley, they made substantial improvements to the road from Sonora to Kennedy Meadows so that heavy equipment could be transported along the route.[57] Today the Sonora and Mono Road has been replaced by State Highway 108. Some traces of the old wagon road are still visible from the highway; others have succumbed to erosion and undergrowth.

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[55]Ibid., 15 March 1901.

[56]N. Ellery, "Report of the Department of Highways," Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Thirty-fifth Session of the Legislature of the State of California, vol. 2 (Sacramento: State Printer, 1903), 17.

[57]"Report of Department of Highways," Senate Journal Appendix, Thirty-seventh Session, vol. 3 (Sacramento: State Printer, 1907), 21; Democratic Banner, 4 August 1906.

CONCLUSION

By 1852, Tuolumne County businessmen and other property owners, propelled by the frenzy of California's gold rush, had grandiose visions for the expansion and prosperity of the southern mines. Virtually overnight Tuolumne County had become one of the most populous and productive counties in the state. Familiar standards of modest income had been supplanted by expectations of bustling enterprise and soaring property values. Many citizens of the Mother Lode came to believe that affluence was the rightful destiny of their community. Anything less was labelled "hard times."

The attempt to fulfill these high expectations was the primary motivation behind the development of the Sonora and Mono Road. Lured by visions of wealth, residents were ready to accept even the most outlandish claims about the feasibility and potential of a trans-Sierra route. When a trail was first proposed in 1852, though, anticipation of its contribution to the success of the region was modest. Local citizens hoped the emigrant trail would bring in permanent settlers who would enhance the community by providing needed skills and products. They also expected that the establishment of a permanent emigrant route would increase trade, raise property values, and amplify the prominence of the region.

These modest goals were only partially realized during the three years the trail was in use. Although a significant number of people traversed the new route in 1853, many had previously settled in the southern mines and would

have returned there even if they had used a different trail into California. Of those who are known to have used the Walker River Trail, most eventually located in the San Joaquin Valley. Some mined in Tuolumne County briefly before moving on, while only a small proportion became permanent residents there.[1]

Although the Walker River Trail failed to attract a substantial number of new settlers, it contributed significantly to the meager herds of cattle and sheep in the southern mining region. Statistics recorded along the trail in 1853 suggest that the Walker River route was proportionally more popular with cattlemen than other trails were.[2] The abundance of water and grass along the new route attracted many herdsmen. In 1852 Tuolumne County only had about five thousand head of cattle and San Joaquin about seven thousand.[3] According to one estimate, 18,750 cattle were brought over the Walker River Trail in 1853.[4] Even in 1854, when use of the trail had declined sharply, more than five thousand head of cattle were brought over the route.[5] Aware of the

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[1]Only a small percentage of those who purportedly used the Walker River Trail have been identified. They were usually families who settled locally. Those who have not been identified were more likely single or settled further from the Southern Mines.

[2]There was an average of 7.9 head of cattle for each immigrant on the Walker River Trail in 1853. The average for the entire migration in 1853 was 6.7 at Fort Kearny. The latter figure would have been much lower by the time they had crossed the Nevada deserts. See San Francisco Herald, 5 August, 1 November 1853.

[3]"Report of the Secretary of State on the Census of 1852 of the State of California," Appendix to the Journal of the Senate and Assembly of the Legislature of the State of California (Sacramento: State Printer, 1852), 33, 52.

[4]San Joaquin Republican, 5 November 1853.

[5]"Governor's Message," Journal of the Sixth Session of the Legislature of the State of California (Sacramento: State Printer, 1855), 43-44. According to figures reported to Governor John Bigler, about 8 percent of the cattle entering the state in 1854 came by way of the Walker

shortage of beef in the southern mines, some ranchers had returned east in 1852 and 1853 specifically to bring herds of cattle west the following season.[6]

Tuolumne County residents had put so little money and effort into the development of the Walker River Trail that its success or failure was of little concern to them by 1854. The trail had only been an ancillary project in the scheme of Tuolumne County's growth. Throughout the 1850s the development of the mines was the central focus of local residents. Little surplus capital remained for speculative ventures such as mountain roads when proven riches abounded just beneath the surface. Declining emigration, increasing competition among the various trails, and a thriving economy gave Tuolumne County little incentive to pursue the road project throughout the 1850s.

A number of substantial changes had taken place by 1860 which made the Sonora and Mono Wagon Road enterprise far more significant to the people of Tuolumne County than the emigrant trail had been. The mines in California were declining while those in Nevada were flourishing. The Sonora and Mono Road project became the means to rescue Tuolumne County's decaying economy. By 1863, residents of the southern mines had been led to expect that the prosperity of the earlier decade would be restored with the opening of the road.

Another aspect of the road project which gave it added significance was that taxpayers were being asked to finance the construction. With the issuance

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River Trail. The most popular route was Noble's over which traveled 39 percent of the cattle that year.

[6]The largest of these herds was brought by George Washington Trahern. He and his partner, John McMullen, operated one of the most successful ranches in San Joaquin County.

the success or failure of the road. Vying for a considerable share of the counties' limited financial resources, road promoters had convinced residents that the venture would be worth their investment. In 1864 when the road opened, however, nearly everyone was disappointed. Frustrated citizens labeled the project a failure.

Measured against the virtually unattainable expectations that had been prophesied by road promoters in the four counties, the Sonora and Mono Road was almost doomed to fall short. While moderate trade did take advantage of the new road, it had only a minor impact on the economies of the three counties west of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Tuolumne County's property values continued to decline at the same rate as before the road opened. Within ten years half of its population had abandoned the county.

The reduction in mining and land values in Tuolumne County contributed to an increase in farming and ranching during the first decade that the Sonora and Mono Road was open. The number of cultivated acres leaped from five thousand in 1864 to forty thousand in 1872.[7] Fruits trees and grape vines covered the largest portion of these acres. During the same span of years the number of board feet of lumber cut rose from 183,000 to 4,000,000.[8] Had the mines been flourishing in Esmeralda and Mono Counties, these products would have been in great demand, and Tuolumne County would have reaped a

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[7]Statistical Tables, Appendix to the Journal of the Legislature of the State of California, (Sacramento: State Printer, 1864-1880).

[8]Statistical Tables, Appendix to the Journal of the Legislature.

bountiful profit. As it was, most the products had to compete on the California market where prices were depressed.

San Joaquin County, on the other hand, experienced a decade of growth from 1860 to 1870, although short of what road promoters had anticipated. The population had been predicted to leap from 9,000 in 1863 to 50,000 ten years later; instead it reached merely 25,000.[9] The value of property, on the other hand, which had been projected to rise in ten years from 5 million to 22 million, climbed to 20 million.[10] Despite the success of San Joaquin County during this period, it is doubtful that the limited commerce on the Sonora and Mono Road contributed significantly to the valley's economy.

Stanislaus County experienced similar growth during the same period. Population rose steadily from about 2,000 in 1864 to over 6,000 a decade later. Property values climbed faster than the increase in population, from 800,000 to over 7 million.[11] While Stanislaus County ranchers used the Sonora and Mono Road for access to summer pastures for cattle and sheep, the mountain road played only a minor role in the county's development.

On the eastern side of the mountains, Mono County, which had contributed the least to the road project, gained the most in proportion to its population. Mono County's property values had peaked in 1863 at $500,000 and then slumped two years later to $100,000 after it was discovered that

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[9]San Joaquin County Census, 1860, 1870; Stockton Daily Independent, 13 February 1863.

[10]Appendix to the Journal of the Senate and Assembly of the Nineteenth Session of the Legislature of the State of California, 1872-73, vol. 1 (Sacramento: State Printer, 1874), 176-77.

[11]Statistical Tables, Appendix to the Journal of the Legislature.

Aurora was in Nevada, not Mono County, California. By 1866, though, Mono County had rebounded to $300,000 and by 1873 had returned to $500,000.[12] Undoubtedly the trade generated by the Sonora and Mono Road greatly enhanced the economy of the isolated county by opening markets for Mono County ranchers and aiding the development of mining throughout the region.

Throughout the southern mines the Sonora and Mono Road certainly contributed to some degree to the overall welfare and economic stability of the region. In Tuolumne County, however, where the moderate success of the road had not been nearly enough to curb the recession caused by the decline of mining, animosity and disillusionment about the project still lingered.

Why wasn't the road the success that had been promised? Had road promoters intentionally misled the public about the feasibility and benefits of the road in order to secure their support for the project? For the most part those who had advocated building the road were businessmen and other property owners. While they had the most to gain from the success of the road, they also were contributing the largest shares of the taxes and tolls which paid for its construction. Those who sponsored the road may well have believed the grandiose promises of success they were broadcasting. The prosperity of the Placerville Road and the Comstock mines had made the Sonora and Mono Road's prospects appear equally as favorable.

Proponents of the road were certainly aware of the power of positive forecasts on the future of their communities. Newspapers were usually reluctant to print negative statements about the economy of their towns, knowing that

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[12]Ibid.

such descriptions would turn prospective newcomers away. Optimistic forecasts were invariably the rule. Business was always "improving." This same view was taken toward the Sonora and Mono Road. Road supporters expected the swell of enthusiasm for the road to make it the success that they predicted.

While road promoters had been sincere in their predictions about the benefits to be derived from the road, they possessed little understanding of its intended route and the difficulties of construction over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Their accounts and descriptions spoke with authority, but their conclusions were often faulty. Early surveys of proposed routes reflected a complete lack of appreciation for the formidable terrain. In 1861, Alexander, a purported engineer and surveyor, declared that the road could be built for four hundred dollars a mile.[13] A year later Heslep projected the road by a different route at the same price.[14] The actual cost of construction exceeded two thousand dollars a mile.[15] Cooper and Wallace's survey in the fall of 1862, the first accurate appraisal of the route, set the total cost of the road at 150,000 dollars, but just how many miles would be built for those dollars was unclear.[16] The entire road ended up costing twice that amount.

Besides the expense, other shortcomings contributed to the road's perceived failure. Residents had been told repeatedly, even by engineer

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[13]Tuolumne Courier, 16 November 1861.

[14]Stockton Weekly Independent, 3 May 1862.

[15]Stockton Daily Independent, 12 November 1863.

[16]Sonora Union Democrat, 25 October 1862.

Handy, that the road would be kept open year round.[17] Deep snow made that impossible. Furthermore, a number of miles of the road along Deadman Creek followed the shaded south side of the canyon where drifts lingered into summer. Grades on the road were not to exceed fourteen feet to one hundred, but in several places they did.[18] Tight turns in numerous locations limited the size of teams that could use the route. The combination of sharp turns and steep grades severely restricted the payload of freight wagons. While these were important limitations, the road was open for use. If there had still been the opportunity for substantial profits, teamsters would not have let sharp turns or steep grades deter them.

The failure of the road to meet the high expectations of it supporters came from the delays in construction and the decline in mining east of the Sierra Nevada, not from the people who built it Had the road been built sooner or the mining boom continued longer, the road could have paid for itself in a single year of tolls.

The most significant delay came from the citizens themselves who let the momentum of their early success with the Walker River Trail dissipate. From 1854 until 1861 Tuolumne County did virtually nothing to establish a trans-Sierra road while counties to the north took the lead. Both the Placerville and the Big Trees Roads were improvements of already established emigrant trails, which mitigated the difficulties and expenses of construction and expedited their early completion. The Sonora and Mono Road, on the other hand, was forged

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[17]Stockton Daily Independent, 12 November 1863.

[18]California Statutes, Fifteenth Session, Chap CLXIV, Sec 2., p. 155

mainly through unchartered country. Valuable time was lost first in locating and surveying the route and later in constructing it through virgin territory.

In 1862, the quibbling between Browne and Clark and Brannock caused several months of delay. If Browne and Clark had been more concerned with locating the most feasible route than with diverting the road past their ranches, they might have pursued the suggestions for a route up the Middle Fork of the Stanislaus River sooner than they did. Detailed surveys might have been completed before the winter snows. Another delay resulted from underestimating the cost of building the road. Had adequate funds been available in 1863 and contracts for the portions of the road at higher elevations awarded sooner, work crews might have been able to complete the road in a single year.

Remarkably the political tumult in 1863 had little effect on the actual construction of the road. Despite the allegations that Patterson had hired workers from outside the county to bolster the Democratic vote, the road commissioners were satisfied with both the progress of the crews and the quality of work.[19] Construction continued in 1863 until winter forced suspension of operations. Allegations that the road had been detoured over an inferior route to the benefit of road commissioners and their friends may have been warranted based on early maps of the route, but in the end the road followed as direct a course as the terrain would permit. The highway route has remained virtually unchanged for 125 years.

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[19]Stockton Daily Independent, 9, 16 September 1863.

Some of the most serious delays on the completion of the road were the result of the weather. The severe storms and floods of 1862 probably set the project back one entire year, first by diverting financing and then by delaying exploratory surveys. Each year winter snows forced suspension of work on virtually the entire route. Allen even blamed the unusually dry weather in 1865 for the high cost of provisions.[20] With limited funds he was forced to employ a smaller work force than he otherwise might have.

Prompt, aggressive action by residents of the southern mines could have produced a trans-Sierra road as early as 1862, in time to reap the benefits of thriving Nevada mines. California residents could hardly have foreseen the collapse of the Esmeralda mining region. Early reports from the mines there indicated substantial mineral wealth. In fact, Aurora mines alone produced thirty-one million dollars over several decades.[21] Unlike the simple mining operations in the early days of the California gold rush, though, Nevada silver mines required expensive processing machinery. The most productive mines were owned by capitalists. The stagnation that swept Esmeralda did not result from the lack of potential wealth but from extensive speculation and malingering lawsuits.[22] While some observers condemned the "sharpers and speculators [who] took advantage . . . to make sudden fortunes" in Aurora, the most significant hindrance to mining was the litigation which brought several leading

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[20]J. R. Hall, "History of the Sonora-Mono Road," 4.

[21]Russell R. Elliot, History of Nevada (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 98-100. This was about 6 percent of Nevada's total mineral production.

[22]Esmeralda Daily Union, 29 July 1864.

operations to a standstill.[23] This retarded development of the mines, deterred further investment, and lowered the wages of mine workers. Consequently the speculative boom in Esmeralda collapsed. Through no fault of their own, residents of the southern mines had built a road to Nevada that few would use.

Those who criticized the completed Sonora and Mono Road as a failure were overlooking the accomplishments of its construction. The road was the culmination of a widening spirit of regional cooperation that had begun in the early 1850s. When the first wagon trail in Tuolumne County had been proposed in 1852, it was the project of a single town, Columbia. No effort had been made even to enlist the support of neighboring Sonora. A year later, though, when Sonora made its attempt to improve the wagon trail, representatives solicited backing from all of Tuolumne County and even San Joaquin County.[24] While some questioned the advisability of aiding a project that would be of most direct benefit to Sonora, others were able to foresee the benefits that would spread to a larger region.

In 1855 when California residents anticipated that the state government would sponsor a road, various clusters of counties consolidated to back regional proposals. A number of residents of Tuolumne, San Joaquin, and Stanislaus Counties supported the Walker River Trail, but their campaign lacked sufficient vigor to win state backing.[25] Through the remainder of the 1850s regional cooperation continued to grow in the southern mining district

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[23]Aurora Daily Times, 11 December 1863.

[24]Sonora Herald, 11 June 1853; San Francisco Daily Herald, 18 June 1853.

[25]Sonora Union Democrat, 31 March 1855.

with the 1857 eight-county conference held in Mokelumne Hill that led to the development of the Big Trees Road.[26]

While regional cooperation was well established in the southern mines by 1863, financial backing for these projects had come from voluntary subscriptions. A stronger commitment was established between Tuolumne, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Mono Counties for the development of the Sonora and Mono Road when bonds were issued. Taxpayers in the four counties were linked in a common endeavor that ultimately benefited the entire region.

While the completed road may not have brought the success taxpayers had anticipated, its construction represented a noteworthy accomplishment in light of the obstacles which had to be overcome. Not the least of these was the rugged mountain terrain. At the time Sonora Pass was the highest wagon road in California.[27] The difficulties of construction consumed the counties' bond money when the road was only half completed, but rather than abandon the undertaking, county representatives turned to private financing to finish the project. Another major obstacle that was overcome in the building of the road was the friction generated by Civil War politics. The road commissioners, engineers, surveyors, and contractors might easily have succumbed to the vehement attacks by fervent Unionists like McCarthy. When bids were solicited for the completion of the road in May 1864, only Patterson and Allen responded. If they had surrendered under the pressure of the American Flag's criticisms of

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[26]Sacramento Daily Union, 7 April 1857.

[27]Today only Tioga Pass in Yosemite National Park exceeds Sonora Pass in elevation.

them in 1863, completion would have been postponed for at least a year, if not much longer.

Another accomplishment of the road was to open up regions of Tuolumne and Mono Counties for development that previously had been isolated. Lumbering became one of the major industries of Tuolumne County. The Sonora and Mono Road served logging operations along the watersheds of the South Fork of the Stanislaus and the North Fork of the Tuolumne Rivers. Small communities appeared along the road to serve travelers, ranchers, lumbermen, sportsmen, and an increasing number of vacationers and tourists. Sugar Pine, Long Barn, Strawberry, Cow Creek, Eureka Valley, Baker's Station, Leavitt Station, and Fales Hot Springs all sprang up as a result of the completion of the road. Other fledgling communities, such as Uniontown, which were bypassed by the road, soon faded from existence. The road also improved accessibility to remote recreation and grazing areas. Throughout the nineteenth century camping, hunting, and fishing were popular activities up and down the length of the road. Strawberry undoubtedly was the most popular recreation area, but the road also improved access to more remote points such as Kennedy Lake, Eagle Meadows, Dardinelles, and the Clark Fork.

The failure of the road was only for those who anticipated sudden riches; its success was more subtle and enduring. Gradual expansion of industry and trade in the mountains east of Sonora eventually made the road an essential commercial artery. The success of the road lay in the determination and spirit of residents of the southern mining region who committed themselves to a formidable project and would not relinquish it despite adversity.

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